# SIR JOHN DERING

By Jeffery Farnol

THE BROAD HIGHWAY
THE AMATEUR GENTLEMAN
THE HONORABLE MR. TAWNISH
BELTANE THE SMITH
THE DEFINITE OBJECT
GREAT BRITAIN AT WAR
OUR ADMIRABLE BETTY
THE GESTE OF DUKE JOCELYN
BLACK BARTLEMY'S TREASURE
MARTIN CONISBY'S VENGEANCE
PEREGRINE'S PROGRESS
SIR JOHN DERING

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BY

JEFFERY FARNOL

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TO

MY FRIEND OF YEARS
AND RIGHT TRUSTY COMRADE

HERBERT LONDON POPE

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK AS A SMALL TRIBUTE TO HIS PATIENCE, FAITHFULNESS, AND UNFALTERING LOYALTY: WITH THE EARNEST HOPE THAT TIME MAY BUT KNIT US EVER MORE CLOSE

JEFFERY FARNOL

Sussex

# CONTENTS


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Prologue | | 1 |
| Chapter | | |
| I | Which Introduces the Dog with a Bad Name | 5 |
| II | Which Describes a Fortuitous but Fateful Meeting | 19 |
| III | Telleth of Mrs. Rose, the Guileful Innocent | 28 |
| IV | Sheweth the Wicked Dering in a New Rôle | 33 |
| V | The Allure of Simplicity: Moonlight and an Elopement | 38 |
| VI | Of Souls, Solitude and a Dusty Road | 45 |
| VII | Which Introduces My Lord Sayle and the Clash of Steel | 53 |
| VIII | Of a Post-Chaise, Iniquity and a Grandmother | 64 |
| IX | Describes the Adventures of the *True Believer* | 70 |
| X | Further Concerning the Same | 78 |
| XI | Of an Altruistic Scot | 83 |
| XII | Describeth the Duplicity of Innocence | 92 |
| XIII | Concerning the Advent of John Derwent | 97 |
| XIV | How the Man of Sentiment Sentimentalised in a Ditch | 107 |
| XV | Which Introduces a Frieze Coat and Its Wearer, One George Potter | 117 |

| Chapter | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| XVI | Describes a Scandalous Item of Fashionable Intelligence and the Consequences Thereof | 127 |
| XVII | How Sir John Dering Came Back to Mayfair | 138 |
| XVIII | How Sir John Dering Went A-wooing | 141 |
| XIX | Tells How Sir John Went "Bear-Baiting" | 146 |
| XX | How Sir John Pledged His Word: with Some Descriptions of the Properties of Snuff | 153 |
| XXI | Of George Potter, His Whistle | 160 |
| XXII | My Lady Herminia Barrasdaile Weaves Webs for an Unwary He | 172 |
| XXIII | How George Potter Circumvented the Preventives | 177 |
| XXIV | Of Mr. Bunkle and the Room with Five Doors | 188 |
| XXV | Telleth How Sir John Beheld the Ghost | 195 |
| XXVI | Concerns Itself Mainly with the "Morning After" | 201 |
| XXVII | Telleth How Mr. Derwent Began His Wooing | 207 |
| XXVIII | Telleth How My Lady Adopted a Fairy Godmother | 218 |
| XXIX | Giveth Some Descriptions of a Tea-Drinking | 223 |
| XXX | In Which Sir John Receives a Warning | 233 |
| XXXI | Being a Chapter of No Great Consequence | 238 |
| XXXII | Sir John Pursues His Wooing | 242 |
| XXXIII | Which, Among Other Small Matters, Telleth of a Snuff-Box | 246 |

| Chapter | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| XXXIV | Concerns Itself with One of the Many Mysteries of the Market Cross Inn | 253 |
| XXXV | Being the Shortest in This Book | 266 |
| XXXVI | Which Contains Further Mention of a Certain Snuff-Box | 268 |
| XXXVII | Which Giveth Some Description of a Murderer's Hat | 276 |
| XXXVIII | Of the Terror by Night | 283 |
| XXXIX | How They Warned Captain Sharkie Nye | 292 |
| XL | Describes, Among Other Things, How My Lady Trampled Triumphantly at Last | 300 |
| XLI | Telleth of the Duel on Dering Tye | 310 |
| XLII | Mr. Dumbrell Mediates | 317 |
| XLIII | In Which Sir John Devotes Himself to the Muse | 322 |
| XLIV | In Which the Ghost Flits to Good Purpose | 328 |
| XLV | Which, as the Reader Observes, Begins and Ends with My Lord Sayle | 334 |
| XLVI | Tells How Sir John Dering Fled the Down-Country | 341 |
| XLVII | Telleth How My Lady Herminia Barrasdaile Went A-wooing | 349 |
| XLVIII | Which Is, Happily, the Last | 354 |

SIR JOHN DERING

# SIR JOHN DERING

## PROLOGUE

The light of guttering candles fell upon the two small-swords where they lay, the one glittering brightly, the other its murderous steel horribly bent and dimmed; and no sound to hear except a whisper of stirring leaves beyond the open window and the ominous murmur of hushed voices from the inner chamber.

Suddenly the door of this chamber opened and a man appeared, slender, youthful and superlatively elegant from curled peruke to buckled shoes, a young exquisite who leaned heavily, though gracefully, in the doorway, glancing back over his shoulder while the slim fingers of one white hand busied themselves to button his long, flowered waistcoat and made a mighty business of it.

"Dead?" he questioned at last in a tone high-pitched and imperious. "Dead . . . is he?"

Receiving an affirmative answer, his lounging figure grew tense, and turning his head he stared at the guttering candles.

Wide eyes that glared in the deathly pale oval of a youthful face, pallid lips compressed above a jut of white chin, nostrils that quivered with every breath, sweat that trickled unheeded beneath the trim curls of his great periwig; a face that grew aged even as he stood there. Presently, with step a little uncertain, he crossed to the open lattice and leaned to stare out and up into the deepening night-sky and yet was conscious that the others had followed him, men who whispered, held aloof from him and peered back toward that quiet inner chamber; and, with his wide gaze still up-turned to the sombre heaven, he spoke in the same high, imperious tone:

"He died scarce . . . ten minutes ago, I think?"

"Aye, thereabouts, sir," answered the surgeon, wiping podgy hands upon a towel. "I did all that was possible,

but he was beyond human aid when I arrived. Æsculapius himself —"

"Ten minutes! . . . I wonder where is now the merry soul of him? . . . He died attempting a laugh, you'll remember, sirs!"

"And thereby hastened his end, sir," added the surgeon; "the hemorrhage —"

"Aye . . . aye," quavered young Mr. Prescott. "Lord . . . O Lord, Dering — he laughed . . . and his blood all a-bubbling . . . laughed — and died . . . O Lord!"

"'T was all so demned sudden!" exclaimed Captain Armitage — "so curst sudden and unexpected, Dering."

"And that's true enough!" wailed Lord Verrian. "'S life, Dering, you were close engaged afore we had a chance to part ye!"

"To be sure I . . . have pinked my man!" retorted Sir John Dering a little unsteadily and with so wild a look that Lord Verrian started.

"Nay, Dering," quoth he soothingly. "'T was he drew first . . . and you'd scarce made a push at each other — and both o' ye desperate fierce — than poor Charles slips, d' ye see, and impales himself on your point . . . a devilish business altogether — never saw such hell-fire fury and determination!"

"I' faith, my lord," answered Sir John, dabbing daintily at pallid lips with belaced handkerchief, "to hear you one might imagine that . . . Charles and I were . . . the bitterest enemies i' the world rather than the . . . best o' friends — aye, the best! For it seems . . . a man may love a man and . . . kill a man. So in yonder room lieth my poor friend Charles, very still and silent, freed o' debts and duns at last and I —" Sir John checked suddenly as from the stairs without stole a ripple of laughter.

"By God — a woman!" gasped Lord Verrian. Young Mr. Prescott sank down into the nearest chair, head between twitching hands; Captain Armitage sprang to bar the door, but, as he did so, it swung open and a girl smiled

in upon them — a tall, handsome creature, black-eyed, full-lipped, dominant in her beauty.

"Lord, gentlemen!" she exclaimed, glancing swiftly from one face to another; "I protest y' are very gloomily mum — as I were a ghost. Nay — what is it? Are you all dumb? Where is Charles? . . . He was to meet me here! You, my Lord Verrian . . . Captain Armitage — where is Charles?"

Lord Verrian turned his back, mumbling incoherencies; Mr. Prescott groaned. And then her quick glance had caught the glitter of the swords upon the table. "Charles!" she cried suddenly. "Charles! Ah — my God!"

Captain Armitage made a feeble effort to stay her, but, brushing him imperiously aside, she fled into the inner room.

Ensued a moment of tense and painful stillness, and then upon the air rose a dreadful strangled screaming, and she was back, the awful sound still issuing from her quivering lips.

"Who . . . who —" she gasped at last, "which of you . . . which of you . . . did it?"

No one spoke, only Sir John Dering bowed, laced handkerchief to lip.

"You — ah, 'twas you?" she questioned in hoarse whisper. "I . . . do not know you. . . . Your name, sir?"

"I am called John Dering, madam."

"Dering," she repeated in the same tense voice — "John Dering — I shall not forget! And 'twas you killed him — 'twas you murdered my Charles — you — you?"

And now she broke out into a wild farrago of words, bitter reproaches and passionate threats, while Sir John stood immobile, head bowed, laced handkerchief to lip, mute beneath the lash of her tongue. Softly, stealthily, one by one, the others crept from the room until the twain were alone, unseen, unheard, save by one beyond the open casement who stood so patiently in the gathering dusk, watching Sir John's drooping figure with such keen anxiety.

". . . God curse you!" she panted hoarsely. "God's curse on you for the murderer you are! Aye, but you shall suffer for it, I swear! You shall rue this night's work to the end of your life—" The passionate voice broke upon a gasping sob, and then Sir John spoke, his head still bowed:

"True, madam, I shall . . . suffer and grieve for this . . . to the end o' my days for . . . Charles was . . . my friend—"

"And you are his murderer, John Dering—so am I your enemy!" she cried. "Your sin may be soon forgot—the world may forgive you—even God may, but I—never will! My vengeance shall follow you, to end only with your last breath—"

Sir John coughed suddenly, the handkerchief at his mouth became all at once horribly crimson, and, sinking to his knees, he swayed over sideways: lying thus, it chanced that the long, embroidered waistcoat he had so vainly sought to button, fell open, discovering the great and awful stains below.

For a moment the girl stood rigid, staring down at the serene but death-pale face at her feet; and then the door swung violently open to admit a very tall man, who ran to kneel and lift that slender form, to chafe the nerveless hands and drop hot tears upon the pallid cheek.

"John, John. . . . O lad—is this the end—"

Sir John Dering's eyes opened and he stared up into the square, bronzed face above him with a faint smile.

"Hector . . . is 't you, Hector?" he whispered. "Tell her . . . the lady . . . that I think . . . her vengeance will end . . . to-night! Which is . . . very well—"

"Woman," cried the man Hector, lifting agonised face, "if ye be true woman run for the surgeon quick, ere he die!"

"Die?" she echoed. "Aye, 't were better he died, far better for him—and for me!" So saying, she turned and sped from the room, laughing wildly as she ran.

## CHAPTER I

### Which Introduces the Dog with a Bad Name

Sir John Dering, at loss for a rhyme, paused in the throes of composition to flick a speck of dust from snowy ruffle, to glance from polished floor to painted ceiling, to survey his own reflection in the mirror opposite, noting with a critical eye all that pertained to his exquisite self, the glossy curls of his great, black periwig, the graceful folds of full-skirted, embroidered coat, his sleek silk stockings and dainty, gold-buckled shoes; and discovering naught in his resplendent person to cavil at, turned back to his unfinished manuscript, sighing plaintively.

"'Soul!'" he murmured; "a damnable word, so many rhymes to 't and none of 'em apt! Roll, coal, hole, foal, goal, pole . . . a devilish word! Mole, shoal, vole—pish!"

It was at this precise juncture that the latch behind him was lifted softly and upon the threshold stood a man whose height and breadth seemed to fill the doorway, a man whose hard-worn clothes were dusty with travel, whose long, unkempt periwig, set somewhat askew, framed a lean brown face notable for a pair of keen blue eyes and the fierce jut of brow, cheek-bone and jaw: a shabby person indeed and very much at odds with the dainty luxury of the chamber before him.

Thus, Hector MacLean, or more properly, General Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean, six foot four of Highland Scot, having surveyed painted walls, polished floor and frescoed ceiling, folded mighty arms, scowled at Sir John's shapely, unconscious back, and emitted a sound that none but a true-born Scot may ever achieve.

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Hector MacLean, whereupon Sir John started, dropped his quill and was upon

his feet all in a moment, modish languor and exquisite affectations all forgotten in eager welcome.

"Hector!" he exclaimed, grasping the Scot's two bony fists. "Hector, man, what should bring you all the way to Paris — and me — after all this time?"

"Four years, John, four years and mair!" nodded Sir Hector. "Four years, and they might be eight, judging by y'r looks. Lad, I'd hardly know ye . . . sic a mighty fine gentleman an' sae pale —"

"A delicate pallor is the mode, Hector," smiled Sir John. "But what brings you to Paris?"

"Aye — what, John?" retorted Sir Hector, with a dour shake of the head. "Who but yourself! What's all this I'm hearing concerning ye, John?"

"Evil beyond a doubt, Hector — evil, I'll wager. But 't is no reason you should stand and scowl when you might sit and smile like the old friend you are —"

"Aye, always your friend, lad, if 't were only for your father's sake!"

"And mine also, I hope, Hector?"

"Aye, John, though you're no the man your father was!"

"I know it, Hector."

"And 't is memory o' him and the promise I made him to be ever mindful o' your welfare hath brought me these weary miles to Parus —"

"And since you are here, you shall stay with me, Hector. Egad, 't will be like old times!"

"No, no, John," sighed MacLean, glancing round the luxurious apartment; "you've grown too fine for me, these days! My dusty claes wad foul your dainty chairs and silken cushions. No, no, lad, you're become too grand a gentleman for a poor, rough, old soldier —"

"Tush and a fiddlestick!" exclaimed Sir John, forcing him down into the nearest chair. "My home is yours whenever you will, Hector."

"Hame, John?" retorted MacLean. "Hame, d' ye call it? Look at this room — all silken fripperies like a leddy's

boudoir. . . . And talkin' o' ladies — look up yonder!" — and he stabbed a bony finger at the painted ceiling where nude dryads sported against a flowery background. "Aye . . . obsairve 'em!" snorted MacLean, forsaking precise English for broad Scots — a true sign of mental perturbation. "Gude sakes, regaird yon painted besoms wi' ne'er a clout tae cover 'em — 't is no a sicht for decent eyes!"

"They were done by a famous painter, Hector, and represent the three Graces — "

"Dis-graces, I ca' 'em! Man, they're . . . fair ower-powerin'!"

"Then don't heed 'em, Hector, regard me instead."

"Yourself, is it?" sighed MacLean. "O man, there's enough o' lace an' broidery aboot ye tae rig oot a' three o' y'r dis-graces frae top tae tae. Ah, Johnnie lad, when I obsairve a' y'r finery o' claes an' mind hoo y'r father was dressed the day he panted his life oot in my arrms wi' a French bayonet in his wame . . . an auld tattered sair-vice coat . . . Aweel, aweel, he was a man, John . . . dead before you were old enough to ken him, mair's the peety . . . aye, mair's the peety. An' to-day, lad, here's me wi' ane fut i' the grave, and here's yersel' vera prone tae a' manner o' follies an' sic by reason as you're wilfu' and over-young — "

"I'm twenty-seven, Hector!"

"Aye, a wilfu' bairn, John, and a'm an auld man ill able tae cope wi' ye, laddie, bein' vera feeble and bowed wi' years."

"Sink me, Hector, but you're strong as a horse and straight as your sword, and can't be a day older than fifty-five or six — "

"Feefty-ane, John, feefty-ane, whateffer! But I was ever a quiet, plain, simple body tae follow the skirl o' the war-pipes . . . battle, skirmish an' siege . . . juist a puir, God-fearin' soger-body — "

"Though King William made you a knight and a general, Sir Hector!"

"Och aye . . . but best of a'—I was y'r father's friend, his comrade an' brither-in-arms in camp an' field, y'ken!" Sir Hector was silent a moment; when next he spoke, his English was more precise than usual. "When your noble father died, John, he left you and your mother to my care. . . . So soon as the wars were over I hasted to take up this sacred charge and found your mother dying . . . but you were alive enough—a bonnie, braw, wee thing. . . . And since then, John, since then—"

"You have been everything to me, Hector—my only true friend!"

"God knoweth I have tried to be faithful to the trust, to keep my word to your father and do my duty by his son—"

"And, sir, indeed you have!"

"Ah, but have I, John—have I so, indeed? Have I trained you up to be the honourable gentleman your father would have been proud of calling son? Have I, lad—have I?"

"I trust so, sir."

"And yet, John—and yet—" Sir Hector rose, his grim lips twitching strangely, and began to pace the floor in sudden agitation. Now, as he turned, it chanced that the scabbard of his long broad-bladed Andrea Ferrara swept a dainty Sèvres ornament to the floor, whereupon he halted to stare down at the fragments with eyes of horrified dismay.

"Forgi'e me, John, forgi'e me!" he exclaimed, unheeding Sir John's reassurances; "but ye see, lad, a'm no juist the man tae be trusted amang sic dainty trifles as yon. Look at it—shivered beyond repair . . . 't is like a man's honour! An' talking of honour, John, your father was a noble gentleman, proud of his honourable name, who kept that name unsullied all his days. . . . Have you done as much, John? O lad, you that are my dead friend's son, you that I have bred from your youth up—have you done as much?"

"Do you doubt it, Hector?"

"Aye, I do, John. God help me, I must — unless report lies."

Sir John's pale cheek flushed, his sensitive nostrils quivered, but his air and tone were placid as usual when he spoke:

"To what do you refer, Hector?"

"To your wild doings and devilments, John, your godless life and riotous wickedness, your hell-fire and damnable practices generally —"

"Sit down, Hector. Pray sit down and fetch your breath," smiled Sir John. "Egad, you 're so full o' news concerning me that 't is plain you have met some friend o' mine of late —"

"Look 'ee, John, scarce have I set foot in Parus than I hear some scurrilous tale o' yourself and some Marquise or other —"

"Ah, the Marquise?" sighed Sir John, turning to glance at his unfinished composition. "I was inditing an ode to her, but my muse halted for an apt rhyme to 'soul,' Hector."

"'T was a curst discreditable affair as I heard it, John!"

"Why, to be sure, Hector, my affairs are always discreditable. But the scandal being well-nigh a week old begins to grow stale, and the Marquise will be out o' the public eye already, poor soul, unless she hath contrived some scheme to revive it, and she 's a clever creature, on my soul she is — ah, and that reminds me! What the deuce rhymes with 'soul,' Hector? There 's roll and poll and dole and goal and —"

"Hoot-toot, man!" exclaimed MacLean. "The de'il awa' wi' y'r rhymes!"

"With all my heart, Hector, for they 're bad enough, I fear," sighed Sir John.

"Sic sinfu' repoorts as I 've been hearin' o' ye, John!" exclaimed MacLean, striding up and down the room again. "Sic a gallimaufry o' waefu' wickedness, sic lug-tingling tales. . . . O man, John, y'r reputation fair stinks!"

"It does, Hector!" nodded Sir John placidly. "Indeed, 't is a reputation I find something hard to maintain and live up to — though I do my best — "

"Your best, whateffer? Aye, wi' your gamblin', your duellin' an' your fine French hussies — like this Marquise — a feckless body and shameless — "

"And therefore fashionable, Hector! Remember, this is Paris!"

"Parus!" snorted MacLean; "O Parus! Edinb'ro 's a sinfu' town, forbye it hath its savin' graces. Lon'non 's waur, but — Parus! Man, I 'm no an archangel, y' ken, but — Parus! And this brings me back tae yoursel', John."

"And pray what have you heard concerning me particularly, Hector? Come, what are my latest sins? Whose wife have I lured from sorrowing spouse? What young innocent is my latest victim? What hopeful youth have I ruined at the gaming-table . . . and in heaven's name — smile, man!"

"How, smile is it, and my heart waefu' for ye, lad? Repoort speaks ye a very deevil, John."

"Aye, but even the devil is never so black as he is painted, Hector!"

"Ha, will ye be for tellin' me repoort hath lied, John?"

"Let us rather say it hath not spoke truth."

"Whaur 's the differ, lad?"

"Report, Hector, doth trumpet me forth a very monster of politely vicious depravity. I am Sin manifest, perambulating Iniquity. Do I sit me down to the gaming-table I am bound to ruin some poor wretch, do I but kiss a woman's finger-tips she is forthwith a mark for every scandalous tongue. My sins, Hector, be all superlative and very pertinaciously come home to roost. Egad, I befoul my own nest with a persistency that amazes me! But then, it seems some are born to iniquity, some achieve iniquity, and some have iniquity thrust upon 'em — "

"How so, John lad, what d' ye mean?"

"That I have an enemy — nay two, rather! The one

being myself — and he is bad enough o' conscience — but the other — ah, Hector, this other one is more implacable, more unrelenting and a thousand times more merciless!"

"Who is he, lad, a God's name?"

"'T is no he," sighed Sir John.

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir Hector, coming to an abrupt stand; "you mean — her?"

"I do, Hector! 'T is an ill thing to have an enemy, but if that enemy be a woman, young, beautiful, of high estate and very wealthy — the situation becomes desperate."

"A wumman!" repeated Sir Hector, rasping thumb and finger across bony chin. "You mean 'the Barrasdaile,' of course, John?"

"Aye, the Lady Herminia Barrasdaile."

"To be sure I mind weel how she raved and vowed vengeance on ye, lad, the night Charles Tremayne was killed — "

"Poor, reckless Charles . . . I can see him now, Hector, as he laughed . . . and died — "

"Tush, laddie, forget it! 'T was he drew first, and himsel' no better than — "

"He is dead, Hector! Sometimes I've thought you had been wiser, kinder to have let me die also, rather than ha' dragged me back to this emptiness we call 'life' — "

"Emptiness, laddie? Hoot-toot — and yersel' the joy o' the leddies, the envy o' the men! The 'glass o' fashion an' mould o' form,' wi' every young sprig o' gallantry to copy the cut o' your waistcoats? And, you think, John, you think that my Lady Barrasdaile is actually carrying her threat into execution?"

"Well, these last few years, Hector, have proved singularly eventful to me one way or another. I have been involved so often in so many unsavoury affairs and had so many duels forced upon me that my reputation is grown a little threadbare, as you know, and myself notorious."

"And now it seems you 've another duel on your hands."

"A duel? Egad, and have I so? With whom, pray?"

"Losh, man, you should ken that weel enough."

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, pondering.

"I caught but a snatch of idle gossip concerning you, John, and some English Viscount or other — "

"An Englishman, Hector, mark that! Ha," mused Sir John, "I have a vague recollection of throwing somebody's hat out of some window some time or other — but whose hat, or what window, or when, I cannot recall for the life o' me. We must look into this, Hector. Let us summon the Corporal and hear what the perspicacious Robert hath to say."

"What, Corporal Bob? He's still with you, then, John lad?"

"To be sure, Hector," answered Sir John, ringing the small silver bell at his elbow. "He is my major-domo, my valet, my general factotum, and will never be anything but a grenadier to the day of his death. Here he is!" At this moment was a short, sharp double knock and the door opened to admit a very square-shouldered, sharp-eyed man extremely precise as to clothes, speech and gesture, who, beholding Sir Hector's stalwart figure, halted suddenly, whipped up right hand as if to touch neat wig but, thinking better of it, bowed instead and immediately stood at attention.

"Stiff and straight as though on parade, Hector!" murmured Sir John, whereupon the Corporal flushed and immediately "stood easy."

"Ha, Corporal Robert!" exclaimed Sir Hector; "dae ye mind the day we stormed the barricades afore Maestricht, and me wi' yon Frenchman's baggonet through me arrm? If ye hadna' been there, I shouldna' be here — so, Corporal Bobbie, gi'e 's a grup o' y'r hand." The Corporal's cheek flushed again and his eyes glowed as their fingers gripped, but when he spoke it was to his master.

"You rang, Sir John?"

"I did, Robert. I desire you to inform us if I was particularly drunk or no last night?"

"By no manner o' means, Sir John."

"You are ready to swear that?"

"Bible oath, Sir John!"

"I am not often drunk, I believe, Bob?"

"Never more than the occasion demands, sir — and then very genteelly!"

"When was the last occasion, Bob?"

"Two days ago, sir, being the night of the Marquise de Sauvray's reception."

"Was I — 'genteelly' so, that night, Bob?"

"Maybe a leetle — elevated, sir."

"Yes," nodded Sir John, "I 've a dim memory of breaking my cane over the link-boy's head!"

"Link-boy was insolent, sir. Link-boy deserved it."

"I rejoice to know it, Robert. Was there aught else remarkable in my home-coming on this occasion?"

"Nothing at all, sir! Though to be sure — you sang —"

"Sang, did I?" sighed Sir John. "Anything else, Bob?"

"No, sir! Except for gentleman's perook stuffed into your honour's right-hand coat pocket."

"A peruke, Bob? Oh, begad! If we have it still, show it to me!"

The imperturbable Robert vanished into Sir John's bedchamber and instantly returned with the article in question, turning it upon his hand for his master's inspection.

"A brown Ramillie!" mused Sir John. "No, Bob, I don't seem to know it — it calls up no memory of its erstwhile owner. What sword did I wear that night?"

"Your favourite dress sword, sir, with the gold hilt."

"Fetch it, Bob." The weapon was duly brought and, unsheathing it, Sir John eyed it keenly from pierced shell to glittering point. "Ha!" sighed he, returning blade and scabbard. "What has not been, will be, I fear! A gentleman's hat out of a window and a gentleman's peruke in my pocket would seem to indicate a meeting soon or late with some one or other!"

"With Viscount Templemore, sir, as I am give to under-

stand. . . . Young gentleman has been taking of fencing lessons constant ever since," answered Robert imperturbably.

"Templemore!" exclaimed Sir Hector. "Viscount Templemore, is it? Man, Jack, ye no can fecht wi' him, he's but a lad — a child — bairn in breeks!"

"And but lately from England, eh, Bob?" questioned Sir John.

"He has been here scarce a week, sir, I am give to understand."

"Mark that, Hector!"

"Man, John, what d'ye mean?"

"Robert, pray how many duels have I had forced upon me since we came to Paris five years since?"

"Twenty-three, Sir John."

"And most of 'em gentlemen newly arrived from England — mark that also, Hector! Gentlemen, these, who ha' scarce made my acquaintance than they discover an urgent desire to cross steel with me. Some day I may have an accident and kill one of them, which would grieve me, since he would die in evil cause, Hector."

"Man Jack, what cause are ye meaning?"

"The cause of my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, Hector, beyond doubt!"

Sir Hector made a turn up and down the room.

"But save us a'!" he exclaimed, halting suddenly. "The wumman must be a pairfict deevil!"

"Nay, she's merely a vengeful female, Hector."

"But this puir Templemore laddie. I kenned his father weel — man Jack, ye 'll no fecht the boy?"

"Pray, how may I avoid it, Hector? If he annoyed me t'other night — as he must ha' done, it seems that I affronted him in turn most flagrantly — there is his wig to prove it! How, then, can I possibly refuse him satisfaction? You have fought ere now and must appreciate the delicacy of my position."

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector, and took another turn up and down the room.

"Do not distress yourself," sighed Sir John; "if we must fight I shall endeavour to disarm him merely —"

"And may accidentally kill the lad, swordsman though ye be, John . . . remember Charles Tremayne! So, man Jack, ye'll juist no fight the laddie."

"Not fight?" echoed Sir John.

"Having regaird tae his extreme youth and inexperience and y'r ain reputation as a duellist and man o' bluid. . . ."

"But, Hector, you must see that if I refuse on account of his youth 't will make him the laughing-stock of all Paris."

"Why then, Johnnie lad, ye maun juist rin awa' —"

"Run away, Hector?"

"Juist that, John; ye maun gi'e Parus a chance tae laugh at yersel' — howbeit you 'll rin awa' fra' the puir lad as a man of honour should."

"Impossible, Hector."

"Man, there 's naething impossible tae the son o' your father, I 'm thinkin'!"

Sir John frowned and, crossing to the window, beheld a carriage drawn up in front of the house.

"Robert," said he, "we 've visitors, I think; pray show them up here."

Robert departed forthwith and presently reappeared to announce:

"My Lord Cheevely and Monsieur le Duc de Vaucelles." And into the room tripped two very fine gentlemen enormously bewigged and beruffled, who, having been duly presented to Sir Hector, flourished laced hats and fluttered perfumed handkerchiefs, bowing profoundly.

"Let me die, Sir John," piped Lord Cheevely. "'Od rabbit me, but 't is pure joy to see ya', I vow 't is! Pray forgive our dem'd sudden intrusion, but our mission is delicate, sir, dooced, infinite delicate, and admits o' no delay, as my friend Vaucelles will tell ya'!"

"Parfaitement!" quoth Monsieur le Duc, hat a-flourish.

"Briefly and to the point, m' dear Sir John," continued

his lordship, "we come on behalf of our very good friend, Viscount Templemore, who, with the utmost passible humility i' the world, begs the honour of a meeting with ya' at the earliest passible moment."

"Templemore?" repeated Sir John, tapping smooth forehead with slender finger; "Templemore? I have met him somewhere, I fancy. He is but lately come to Paris, I think, my lord?"

"A week ago or thereabouts, m' dear Sir John."

"And he desires a meeting?"

"Most ardently, Sir John, the point in question being, as ya' remember, of a distinctly — personal nature."

"Indeed," nodded Sir John, "a brown Ramillie wig, perhaps."

"Parfaitement!" answered Monsieur le Duc, with a flourish.

"Precisely, Sir John!" answered Lord Cheevely. "'T will be small-swords, I presume?"

"No, my lord," sighed Sir John.

"Ah, you decide for pistols, then?"

"Nor pistols, my lord. I do not intend to fight with Viscount Templemore."

"Not — not fight?" gasped his lordship, while Monsieur le Duc started and dropped his hat.

"No, my lord," answered Sir John. "I am returning Viscount Templemore's wig with my sincerest regrets so soon as 't is combed and ironed — "

"D' ye mean, sir, that — that you actually refuse Viscount Templemore's challenge?"

"Actually and positively, my lord!"

"But — but," stammered Lord Cheevely. "Oh, demme, such action is impossible — was not — cannot be!"

"That is why I do it, my lord."

"Oh, rat me!" murmured his lordship, goggling. "Oh, split me . . . not fight! Dooce take and burn me — this from you, Sir John! You that ha' never baulked . . . had so many affairs . . . gone out so frequently — oh, smite me dumb!"

"My lord," sighed Sir John, "I have been out so very frequently that I am grown a little weary. You will therefore pray tell Viscount Templemore that I have given up duelling as a pastime for the present, and purpose rusticating awhile —"

"If — if you are serious, sir," exclaimed Lord Cheevely, rolling his eyes, "demme, sir, if you are serious, permit me to tell ya' ya' conduct is dem'd strange, devilish queer and most dooced, dem'd irregular!"

"Parfaitement!" added Monsieur le Duc.

Sir John smiled faintly, though his dreamy blue eyes grew suddenly very keen and piercing.

"Gentlemen," he retorted, "I am about to leave Paris for an indefinite period; when I return, should you have any strictures to make upon my conduct, I shall be charmed to notice 'em. Until then, sirs, I have the honour to bid you adieu."

And so Sir John bowed, the gentlemen bowed and betook themselves away with never another word.

"Man Jack," exclaimed Sir Hector, as the door closed, "leave Parus, is it? O John, laddie — d' ye mean it?"

"Aye, I do, Hector. What with one thing and another, I begin to find Paris a little wearing."

"Is it hame at last, Johnnie; hame tae England?"

"Where else, Hector?"

"When dae we start, lad?"

"Sure, no time were better than the present. We ride to-day, Hector."

"Ou aye — yet bide a wee! Wha' bee 's in y'r bonnet, now, laddie?"

"I go to find my enemy, Hector."

"Save us a'! D' ye mean the leddy?"

"Herminia!" nodded Sir John. "'T is a pretty name! Indeed, Hector, 't is a sweet, pretty name — though vastly difficult to find a rhyme for —"

"And what 'll ye be after wi' the deevilish jade?"

"To exact a just and lasting vengeance, Hector."

"Hoot awa', Johnnie — hoot-toot, ye canna fecht a wumman — "

"I can do worse, Hector!"

"Man John, wha' dae ye mean?"

"I can marry her, Hector."

## CHAPTER II

### Which Describes a Fortuitous but Fateful Meeting

The Fates, those mysterious, unearthly sisters who are for ever busied upon the destinies of poor, finite humanity — the Fates, it seems, decreed that my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, travelling full speed for Paris, should be suddenly precipitated upon the soft, resilient form of her devoted maid, Mrs. Betty, to that buxom creature's gasping dismay and her own vast indignation; wherefore, the huge vehicle coming to an abrupt standstill, down fell the window and out went my lady's angry, albeit lovely, countenance to demand instant explanation from coachmen, footmen and the world in general.

"Why, ye see, my lady," answered red-faced Giles, the coachman, his Sussex calm entirely unruffled, "it do so 'appen as our off-side rear spring 's gone, mam."

"Gone, man, gone? Who 's stolen it? What a plague d' you mean, Giles?" demanded her ladyship.

"I means broke, my lady, snapped, mam, parted-loike. We 'm down on our back-axle — an' theer y' are, mam!"

"Why then, mend it, Giles; mend it at once and let us get on — I must reach Paris to-night if possible."

"Aye, we 'll mend it, my lady, sure to goodness — in toime —"

"How long?"

"Why, it du all depend, my lady — maybe an hour, maybe tu —"

Wide swung the heavy coach-door and forth sprang her ladyship, a slim and graceful fury who, perceiving the damage and necessary delay, swore as only a very fine lady might, with a tripping comprehensiveness and passionate directness that reduced Giles and the two footmen to awed silence.

"Hush, mam!" pleaded Mrs. Betty, as her lady paused for breath. "Don't 'ee now, there 's a duck —"

"But, zounds, wench," cried her mistress, "you know 't is a case o' life and death . . . to be delayed thus . . ."

"Aye, I know, mem — but do 'ee take a sniff at your vinaigrette, my lady —"

"Tush!" exclaimed her ladyship. "Hold your silly tongue, do!"

"Yes, my lady . . . but there 's a light yonder among the trees — an inn, I think, mam —"

"Ha — an inn? Thomas, go, see — and bring help instantly — and order another coach if there be one! Run, oaf, run!" Away sped Thomas, a long-barrelled pistol protruding from either side-pocket, while my lady paced to and fro, fuming with impatience, until back he scurried with two chattering French ostlers at his heels, to say it was an inn, sure enough, but that no manner of conveyance was to be had.

"We 'll see about that!" exclaimed my lady. "Come, Betty!" And off she hasted forthwith, the meek and obedient Betty attendant. It was a small, drowsy inn, but at my lady's advent it awoke to sudden life and bustle, its every chamber seemed full of stir, tripping feet and chattering voices; and all for the English Miladi's comfort and welfare.

Insomuch that, embarrassed by attentions so pervading and multifarious, my Lady Barrasdaile caught up Betty's cloak of homespun, a hooded garment for country wear, and, muffled in its ample folds, went a-walking.

The road, bordered by shady trees, led up a hill, and, lured by the sunset glory, and joying, moreover, to stretch her limbs, cramped by the long journey, my lady ascended the hill and, reaching the top, had paused to admire the view, when she became aware of two horsemen approaching from the opposite direction, and instantly apprehending them to be highwaymen, she slipped aside into an adjacent thicket, waiting for them to pass.

Now as she stood thus, seeing but unseen, the mysterious

Fates decreed that Sir John Dering, reaching the hilltop in turn, should rein in his horse within a yard of her, to glance round about him upon the peaceful countryside, little dreaming of the bright eyes that watched him so keenly, or the ears that hearkened so inquisitively to his words.

"A sweet prospect, Hector!" he exclaimed; "fair and chaste and yet a little sad. 'T is like looking deep into the eyes of a good woman — if there be such! It fills the soul with a sense of unworthiness and sorrow for the folly o' the wasted years."

"Aye, John! An' fower pistols in oor holsters an' twa in my pockets gi'e us six shot in case o' eeventualities."

"The wasted years!" murmured Sir John, musing gaze upon the distant horizon. "'T is a night to grieve in, Hector, to yearn for better things."

"Aye! And though six shot is fair I 'm wishin' ye carried a rale sword like my Andrew here, 'stead o' yon bodkin!"

"How then," smiled Sir John, rousing; "are you expecting battle, murder and sudden death, Hector?"

"A dinna say no or aye t' that, Johnnie man, forbye these French roads be aye ill-travellin', an' I was ever a cautious body, y' ken. 'T is peety ye left Corporal Rob behind; he 's a fair hand wi' pistol or whinger, I mind. However, let us push on ere it be dark."

"Nay, there 's the moon rising yonder, Hector."

"The moon — and what o't, John? I 'm for having my legs under a table and something savoury on 't, lad."

"Then do you ride forward, Hector, and order supper — there is an inn down yonder, I remember; I 'll wait for the moon to rise — "

"Mune-rise? I'fegs, lad, she 'll do 't very weel wi' oot ye, I 'm thinkin'!"

"Aye, but I 'm minded to dream awhile, Hector; the moon ever stirs my imagination — "

"Hoot-toot! De'il awa' wi' y'r dreamin' an' imaginationin'! 'T is mysel' wad tak' ye for a puir, moonstruck

daftie if I didna ken ye for John Dering and son o' your father!"

"If," sighed Sir John, "if, Hector, you could suggest an apt rhyme for 'soul,' now, I should take it kindly . . . though, to be sure, 'dole' might do at a pinch."

"Umph-humph!" snorted General Sir Hector MacLean and urged his horse on down the hill.

Being alone, Sir John dismounted, and tethering his animal, seated himself on grassy bank and gave himself up to introspective reverie.

The awesome, brooding stillness, the splendour of the rising moon, the mystery of the surrounding landscape, and all the magic of this early midsummer night wrought in him a pensive melancholy, a growing discontent of himself and the latter years, and he luxuriated in a consciousness of his infinite unworthiness.

Thus, with wistful gaze upon the full-orbed moon, Sir John had already mentally forsworn the world, the flesh and the devil, when he was roused suddenly by a rustling of leaves near by and the sharp crack of a dried twig; next moment he was beside his horse and had whipped forth, cocked and levelled one of his travelling pistols.

"*Qui va là?*" he demanded, and then in English: "Come out! Show yourself, or I fire!"

"Don't!" cried a voice. "Don't!" The leaves parted suddenly, and Sir John beheld a woman within a yard of him; majestically tall she was, and muffled in the long folds of a coarse cloak, beneath whose shadowy hood he glimpsed the pale oval of a face and a single strand of curling hair darkly innocent of powder.

Sir John lowered the pistol and, removing his hat, bowed.

"Welcome, Phyllida!" said he.

"That ain't my name," she answered.

"Then it should be, for 't is a charming name and suits you."

"You — you 'm English, sir?" she questioned.

"I thank God!" he answered gravely.

"Then — oh, I am safe!" she sighed, and sinking upon the grassy bank, hid her face in her hands.

"Safe?" he repeated, touching her bowed head very gently. "Never doubt it, child — all heaven be my witness. 'T is easy to guess you English also, and of the sweet south country, I think?"

At this she raised her head and he saw a handsome face framed in dark, rebellious curls, eyes wide and innocent, and a vivid, full-lipped mouth.

"O sir, ye du be a mortal clever guesser — I were born in Sussex!" she answered.

"Sussex?" murmured Sir John. "Seely Sussex! I was born there too, 'twixt the sheltering arms of Firle and Windover. . . . The gentle South Downs. . . . I loved every velvet slope of them! I mind the sweet, warm scent of the wild thyme, and the dance of the scabious flowers in the wind . . . 't is years since I saw them last."

"But the wild thyme is still sweet i' the sun, sir, an' the scabious flowers do be a-noddin' an' beckonin' as we sit here."

"Beckoning, child? 'T is a sweet thought! Beckoning me back to England . . . to the reverent stillness of the immemorial hills . . . my loved Downs! Beckoning me back to the old house that has stood empty so long! Paris behind me, London before me . . . but deep in my heart a memory of the silent Downs . . . and of a better living."

"'Ee du talk tur'ble strange, sir!" she exclaimed, her wide gaze searching his wistful features.

"'T is the moon, child — blame the moon! Though her Lunatic Majesty doth usually afflict me with a poetic fervour that erupts in somewhat indifferent verse. But what o' yourself, child? Whence are you — what do you so far from home?"

"Nay, sir," she retorted, shaking her head, "you 'm so clever you must guess if ye can."

"Agreed!" smiled Sir John. "Suffer me to sit beside you — thus, and whiles we gaze up at stately Luna, Chaste

Dian, Isis the mysterious, I, her most humble votary, will strive to rede thy past, present and future. And first — thy name? It should be sweet and simple like thyself and breathe of England. And if it is not Phyllida, it should be Rosamond or Lettice or Anthea or — "

"Nay, sir," she sighed, "'t is only Rose!"

"Aye, and what better!" quoth he. "'T is a sweet English name and easy to rhyme with. Let us try." And with his gaze uplift to the moon, Sir John extemporised thus:

> "O flower of Love, thou fragrant Rose
> Thy love methinks should be
> A balm to soothe all earthly woes
> A sweetness that unfading blows
> Through all eternity —

"Hum! 'T is not so bad, though 'faith it might be better. That last line is something trite perhaps! Aye, I may better it with a little thought!"

"Nay — nay, 't is well as 't is!" she exclaimed. "'T is excellent, I . . . 'deed, sir, I do think you 'm a tur'ble clever gentleman!"

"Though no poet, Rose, I fear! So much for thy name! Now as to thyself. Thou 'rt a woman and young, and hast therefore dreamed o' love — "

"La, sir, how should 'ee know that? 'Ee du make me blush!"

"And have you loved often, child?"

"Oh, fie and no, sir! I 'm no fine lady — "

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed Sir John fervently, and lowered his gaze to the face so near his own, which was immediately averted.

"Pray won't your honour please tell me some more about myself?" she pleaded.

"As what, child?"

"What I am, what I do for a livin' — an' all about me?"

"Why, then," pursued Sir John, "you are maid to serve some prideful, painted creature — "

"Oh, 't is wonderful!" she murmured.

"Some haughty, ineffective she who perchance rails at thee, pinches and slaps thee, pulls thy pretty hair, envying thy sweet, fresh beauty."

"Oh, 't is like witchcraft!" she murmured in awestruck tones.

"And thou 'rt in France, child, because she is here and travels belike to Paris." Sir John turned to find her regarding him in speechless wonder.

"Well, child?" he questioned.

"O sir!" she whispered. "'T is all — so — marvellous true. Now tell me, oh, please your honour — tell me o' the future. Shall I ever be a fine, grand lady — shall I?"

"God forbid!" he answered. "Nature formed thee a better thing! Thou 'rt artless as the flowers that bloom, and the birds that sing because they must, for pure joy of it. Thou 'rt sweet and fresh as the breath of Spring — heaven keep thee so, if 't is indeed to Paris you journey, child."

"Indeed, sir, and so 't is."

"Ha — Paris!" quoth he and scowled. "Alas, child, you shall find there no fragrance of wild thyme, no dancing scabious flowers. . . . And your mistress drags you to Paris, because she is a fine lady, an exotic, blooming best in an atmosphere that for thee . . . ah, child . . . alas, sweet Rose! Heaven send a clean wind to cherish thee lest thy sweetness languish . . . fade and wither. . . . Ha, the devil! Why must she drag you to Paris?"

"O, your worship, 't is on a matter o' life an' death. We should be a-galloping at this moment but that the coach broke down, and my lady in a mighty pet — such tantrums! So after I 'd put her to bed — and such a bed! I crept out o' the inn — and such an inn! And lost my way . . . and a man . . . ran after me and so I . . . I found you, sir. An' now I must be a-goin' back an 't please you, sir, for I must be on my road to Paris, along o' my lady an' all to stop two gentlemen fightin' each other!"

"Ha, a duel, child? Do you chance to know these gentlemen's names?"

"For sure, sir, my lady talks o' nought beside! One's Viscount Templemore, an' t'other's Sir John Dering — 'the Wicked Dering,' as they call him at home."

"Humph!" said Sir John, staring up at the moon again. "Ha!" And in a little, turning to regard his companion, he found her watching him bright-eyed from the shadow of her hood. "So they call him 'the Wicked Dering' at home, do they, Rose?"

"Oh, yes, sir, ever an' always."

"Ah, well!" sighed Sir John. "Howbeit, child, you can assure your lady that her journey to Paris is wholly unnecessary."

"How, sir . . . Oh, d'ye mean she is . . . too late? Have they fought already?"

"I mean they cannot fight, because Sir John Dering hath run away."

"Run away . . . Sir John Dering? Without fighting?" she questioned breathlessly. "Oh, 't is impossible!"

"'T is very truth — upon my honour."

"You . . . you are sure, sir?"

"Absolutely, child! I happen to know Sir John Dering and something of his concerns."

"Oh . . . you are . . . his friend, sir?"

"Nay, hardly that, Rose," sighed Sir John; "indeed, some might call me his most inveterate enemy. . . . But for Sir John Dering I might have been a . . . happier man."

"And so . . . you hate him?"

"Let us rather say — I grieve for him."

"But they say he is very wicked — a devil!"

"Nay, child, he is merely a very human man and something melancholy." After this they sat side by side in silence for a while, Sir John gazing up at the moon and she at him.

"However," said he suddenly, "your lady need no longer drag you to Paris, seeing her journey is unneces-

sary. So soon as we reach the inn, I myself will make this sufficiently manifest to her."

"You — you will see my lady, sir?"

"Aye, I will, child."

"Then an 't please your honour — 't is time I found the inn."

"Found it, child?"

"Alack, yes, sir, for I've lost it! But if your honour will only help me find it . . . your honour is so marvellous clever!"

"Nay, Rose, our wiser course were to sit here and let it find us — or rather, my friend will come a-searching me so soon as supper be ready and . . . indeed, yonder he comes, I fear! Yes," sighed Sir John, as the huge form of Sir Hector loomed nearer, "I grieve to say he is here already!"

Perceiving Sir John's companion, MacLean halted suddenly.

"Losh, man Jack!" he exclaimed.

"'T is I, Hector. Have you ordered supper?"

"I hae that!"

"Then pray mount my horse and lead the way. Rose and I follow."

"Umph-humph!" quoth Sir Hector, and, mounting forthwith, he trotted down the hill, but profound reprobation was in the cock of his weatherbeaten hat and the set of his broad shoulders as he went.

## CHAPTER III

### Telleth of Mrs. Rose, the Guileful Innocent

"Strip, wench, strip!" cried Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, tossing the disguising cloak into a corner of the bedchamber. "Off with your clothes, girl, off with 'em — we're both of a size, thank heavens — so strip, Betty, strip, as I'm a-doing!"

"Yes, my lady," sighed comely Betty, large and patient and calmly indulgent to the unexpected whims and caprices of her imperious mistress. "But pray, mam, why should us undress afore bedtime?"

"That we may dress again, sure, Bet; to-night I am you and you are me . . . except that my name is 'Rose — Rose,' you'll remember!" admonished her ladyship, kicking off her fine gown.

"Yes, mam," answered placid Mrs. Betty; "but why for 'Rose'?"

"Because 't was the first name occurred to me. Come, tie me these strings, wench! Sir John Dering is below, and if he should demand to see me — I mean you —"

"Sir John, my lady? Dering? O lud, not — not *the* Sir John Dering — not *him*, my lady?"

"Himself at last, face to face, Bet. Help me into this gown o' yours . . . O gad, what an infinity of buttons! Fasten me in, child! See, you are bigger in the waist than I, Bet . . . and devilish tight above here . . . I vow I can scarce breathe! Nay, button away, girl, I'll endure it. . . . I must breathe prettily, pantingly. My Lady Felicity Flyte hath the trick on 't and 't is much admired, so I'll e'en pant and endure! Now, one o' your mobs, girl, a cap with ribbands to 't . . . aye, this shall serve — so! Now, how am I?"

"Ravishing, my lady! O mam!"

"Why, your things become me, I think."

"Vastly, mem! O my lady!"

"Now, 't is thy turn, Bet. Shalt wear my yellow lute-string wi' the panniers."

"O my lady, but you ha' wore it but once!"

"No matter, 't is thine, Betty. Come, out with it and on with it. Nay, first your hair must be powdered and pomatumed, your cheeks smeared wi' rouge — yourself sufficiently pulvilled — "

"But, O mam, why must I — "

"In case Sir John desires speech with you — that is to say, with me. He may not and yet again he may, and you must be prepared."

"O mem," quavered Betty. "O my lady — suppose he stare at me?"

"Stare back at him, for sure — like any other lady o' fashion!"

"But what must I say?"

"As little as possible! So long as you look sufficiently handsome and stare bold enough, 't will serve. Now, let me look at you! Cock your chin, girl — so! Gad's life, but you 're a handsome creature and look as haughty a fine city-madam as need be. Now mind to be sufficiently disdainful of all and sundry and especially of me — "

"Nay, my lady, 't were impossible! I shall be calling you mam and madam, for sure."

"Zounds no, Bet, 't would ruin all! You must be mighty short with me, rap my knuckles with your fan and rail on me if possible — "

"Rail on thee, my dear lady — oh, I could n't!"

"You must, girl! And if you could swear a little 't would be pure!"

"Swear, mem — me? Who at?"

"At Sir John Dering if possible."

"But I don't know how to swear, mem."

"You 've heard me often enough!"

"Aye, but I could never swear so sweet and ladylike as you, mem."

"Why, then," sighed her ladyship, "we must forgo

your swearing, I suppose, though 't is pity. But hark 'ee, Bet, and mark this well! Should Sir John come endeavouring to persuade you to return to England, you will raise your eyebrows — so! Droop your eyelids — thus! and say: 'Howbeit, sir, 't is my pleasure to journey on to Paris!' Then turn your back on him and send me to command your coach to the door — "

"Aye — and when it comes, my lady?"

"Why, get in and drive away, sure!"

"But where to, mem?"

"Towards Paris, silly wench — or anywhere you choose — "

"And you, madam? You will come along o' me?"

"Perchance I may and perchance not. Mayhap I shall run away — disappear at the last moment — I 'm not decided on this yet — "

"O my dear lady — "

"If I should think fit to run away, you will drive as far as St. Pol, then turn back to Dieppe, where you shall probably find me at the 'Eperon d'Or' — Giles knows it — "

"But, my lady — O mem — what o' yourself?"

"So long as I am myself I shall be safe, child. I 'll play my part, do you play yours! Remember, should you meet the gentlemen below, swim in your walk, tilt your chin, say nothing — and stare. Stare above 'em, below 'em and through 'em, but never at 'em. And now I 'll go order supper — in private, for thy sake, Bet. Lud, but I 'm famished!" And a-down the creaking stair tripped my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, as dainty a waiting-maid as ever was or ever will be.

Then it chanced that Sir John, rolling his eyes in the throes of poetical composition, suddenly beheld her standing radiant in the doorway, all fresh, shapely young womanhood from ribbanded cap to trim shoe; and struck by her air of modesty and all the shy-sweet beauty of her, he sighed, closed his tablets and slipped them into his pocket.

"Ah, Rose," said he, "thou flower of innocence, sure no words of mine may do thee justice, thou 'rt beyond my poor poesy. Come hither, child, and tell me, is your mistress still for Paris?"

"'Deed, yes, sir, she seems mighty set on 't."

"Alas, sweet Rose!"

"Is Paris so tur'ble wicked, sir?"

"'T is no place for the like o' thee — thou gentle innocent!" At this, my Lady Herminia glanced at him shy-eyed, drooped her lashes, pleated a fold in her neat apron and contrived to become the very perfect embodiment of all that ever had been, was or possibly could be virginally shy and sweet and innocent.

"But I do hear 't is a mighty fine place, sir," said she softly, "and I do yearn to see the ladies and grand gentlemen. And, if 't is so wicked, naught harmful can come anigh me by reason I do ever wear this — night and day, your honour!" And she drew from her bosom a small, plain gold cross suspended about her shapely throat by a ribband. "'T was my mother's, sir, and 't is good against all evil . . . and I shall say my prayers!"

Now at this, Sir John must needs call to mind certain unworthy episodes of the last five years: his keen gaze wavered and he sat, chin on breast, staring into the smouldering fire.

"And so d' ye see, sir," she continued, finding him silent, "I shall not fear anything, nor anyone — no, not even though he be wicked as — as the 'wicked Sir John Dering' himself!"

"Child," said Sir John at last, "go ask your lady to favour me with five minutes' conversation."

"Yes, your honour!" she answered, curtseying, and departed obediently forthwith.

Thus Sir John was presently ushered upstairs and into the presence of a tall, handsome creature, magnificently attired, who acknowledged his profound obeisance with a curt nod, and thereafter stared at him from head to foot and sniffed.

"Madam," quoth he, a little startled, "I come to reassure you as to the welfare of Viscount Templemore."

The lady stared haughtily at his dusty boots. "I am happy to tell you," continued Sir John, "that the meeting will not take place — " The lady, tilting dimpled chin, stared fixedly at the topmost curls of Sir John's peruke. "If, therefore," he proceeded, "you contemplate returning immediately to England, my friend and I shall be honoured to escort you."

The lady shook her handsome head, shrugged her dimpled shoulders and sniffed louder than ever, so much so that Sir John retreated somewhat precipitately.

"Tush, sir, fie and no!" she exclaimed. "I 'm minded to go to Paris an' to Paris I 'll go!"

Sir John opened his eyes a little wider than usual and bowed himself out forthwith.

"O my lady," cried Betty so soon as the door had closed, "O mem, did I do it right?"

"'T was admirable, Bet! Didst see him blench and flush? You dear, clever creature! There is that taffety gown — 't is thine, child — aye, and the neck-chain with the pearl pendant! He flushed — he blenched! Come kiss me, Betty!"

## CHAPTER IV

### Sheweth the Wicked Dering in a New Rôle

Sir John, deep-plunged in gloomy abstraction, was suddenly aroused by the noisy entrance of two travellers, very elegant gentlemen who, cramped from their chaise, stamped and yawned and stretched, and damned the dust, the road, the inn, the landlord and all creation save themselves. Loudest of the twain was a tall, youngish man who wore a stupendous periwig, a gentleman very small as to eyes and large as to teeth that gleamed between the lips of a heavy mouth.

To them presently came the landlord, who, with many profound obeisances and servile excuses, begged them to follow him to a chamber more suited to their nobilities.

Left alone, Sir John sat legs outstretched, chin on breast, staring at the toes of his dusty riding-boots, lost once more in gloomy retrospection of the last five years, his dejection ever deepening, until he was aroused for the second time, as from the other side of the partition behind his chair rose a man's chuckling laugh, the sound of desperate struggling, a woman's scream.

Sir John arose and, stepping out into the passage, threw open the door of an adjoining chamber and saw this: Upon a roomy settle the gentleman in the large toupet and upon his knees, struggling wildly in the merciless clasp of his arms, the girl Rose. Sir John's serenity vanished, his habitual languor changed to vehement action: ensued the quick, light stamp of a foot, a glitter of darting steel and the gentleman's lofty periwig, transfixed upon Sir John's unerring sword-point, was whisked into a distant corner. Then Sir John spoke:

"Monsieur," said he softly, "favour me by releasing your so charming captive." Next moment she was free, and, shrinking to the wall, saw Sir John's face quite trans-

figured, the mobile lips grimly set, the delicate nostrils a-quiver, eyes fierce and threatening as his sword. "Sir," he continued in the same gentle tone, "permit me to tell you that I do not like your face — it irritates me! Pray have the kindness to remove it, therefore — take it hence or — "

"What the devil!" exclaimed the wigless gentleman, getting upon his legs.

"Rose," said Sir John, "child, pray leave us!" For a moment she hesitated then, uttering an inarticulate cry, fled from the room, and Sir John closed the door. "Now, sir," quoth he, saluting the gentleman with an airy flourish of his weapon, "if your friend yonder will be so obliging as to help push this table into the corner we can settle our little affair quite comfortably, I think."

"Damnation!" exclaimed the wigless gallant, and, clapping hand to sword, half drew it, then checked and stood at gaze. When next he spoke his tone was altogether different: "You . . . I think I have the honour to address Sir John Dering?"

"The same, sir."

The gentleman sheathed his sword and bowed.

"My name is Scarsdale, sir," said he. "I had the pleasure of meeting you in Paris lately — at the Marquise de Sauvray's rout, if you remember?"

"I do not, sir."

Mr. Scarsdale took out his snuff-box, stared at it, tapped it, fumbled with it and bowed.

"My dear Sir John," said he, "if I had the curst misfortune to . . . ah . . . to cross you in the matter of . . . ah . . . your rustic Venus . . . poach on your preserves, 'twas done all unwitting and I apologise. . . . A delicious creature; I felicitate you."

"Mr. Scarsdale," answered Sir John, "I accept your explanation. At the same time, I take leave to point you to the fact that this inn is small and I detest being crowded. May I then venture to suggest that you and your friend seek accommodation — elsewhere?"

"How, sir — how, Sir John?" stammered Mr. Scarsdale, running nervous hand over wigless, close-cropped head. "You . . . you ask us to — to — "

"Favour me with your absence, sir."

For a moment Mr. Scarsdale stood mute; his face grew suddenly red and as swiftly pale, his eyes glared, his large teeth gleamed evilly, but noting Sir John's resolute air, his piercing gaze, the serene assurance of his pose, Mr. Scarsdale commanded himself sufficiently to bow with a flourish.

"Tom," quoth he to his silent companion, "ha' the goodness to pick up my wig." Receiving which indispensable article, he clapped it on somewhat at random and, hurrying from the room with the silent Tom at his heels, was presently heard calling for horses and chaise and damning all and sundry louder than ever until, with a stamp of hoofs and rattle of wheels, he was borne damning on his way.

Sir John was in the act of sheathing his sword, when he turned at sound of a light footstep.

"Ah, Rose," sighed he, gazing into her troubled eyes, "yonder go two of your 'grand gentlemen' — Paris teems with such! Better surely an honest English lover in homespun than be hunted by Brutality in lace and velvet. Did they fright thee, child . . . and despite thy prayers and little cross?" Here she hid her face in her hands. "Nay, Rose, if they reverence not thy virgin purity how should they revere aught else! And Paris reeks of such as they . . . to hunt thy fresh young beauty! And thou . . . in thy pretty innocence — alas! Wilt thou to Paris, child?"

"Your honour knows my lady is determined on 't."

"Then be you determined also. You have a chin — let me look at it."

Unwillingly she raised her head, eyes abased yet very conscious of his scrutiny.

"Pray what o' my chin, sir?" she questioned.

"Firmly round and with a dimple in 't!" he answered.

"'T is a chin speaks thee resolute to choose and act for thyself. So — if your lady will to Paris let her go without you, child."

"Without me?" she repeated, innocent eyes upraised to his. "O sir, do you mean me to bide here — with your honour?"

At this direct question Sir John was silent a moment, and, meeting the intensity of her gaze, felt his cheeks burn unwontedly.

"Could you trust yourself to — my honour, child?"

For a long moment she made no reply, and Sir John marvelled to find himself awaiting her answer with a feeling akin to anxiety. "Well, child?" he demanded at length.

"I . . . think so, sir."

"You are not sure, then?"

"Ah, sir," she sighed, "I be only a poor maid and you 'm a grand gentleman like — like them as you druv' away."

"Ha, d'ye think so, girl!" he exclaimed pettishly, "Confound me, but you are not flattering! Can you indeed think me of such base, material clay, Rose? Are you so addle-witted, so dense, so dull to suppose 't is your pink-and-white prettiness lures me?"

"La, no, your honour — indeed, no!" she answered humbly, her voice a little uncertain and her face hid beneath the laces of her mob-cap. "Though — though your honour do think I be — pretty?" she questioned.

"Pretty?" he repeated scornfully. "Tush, child! What hath your prettiness to do with it? 'T is your natural goodness draweth me, your fresh simplicity, your purity and unstained innocence! I needs must reverence the white soul of you —"

Here, Sir John chancing to look down and she to look up, their glances met and he was abruptly silent; wherefore she curtseyed demurely and murmured:

"Yes, your honour!" But Sir John was silent so long that she began to tap with fidgeting foot and to pleat a fold in her apron.

"Rose," said he at last, "look at me!" Her eyes were raised in instant obedience, eyes deep and dark and heavy-lashed, that met his keen scrutiny unwavering and wholly unabashed.

"You laughed, I think?" he challenged.

"Who — me, sir?" she cried, eyes wider than ever.

"Do any women possess souls, I wonder!" said he bitterly.

"Parson do think so, your honour."

"Then perchance you may find yours some day, for, until you do, child, you must remain and never know or appreciate the great, good things of life — "

"Tripe an' pig's-trotters, John!" exclaimed Sir Hector, bursting in upon them, brandishing a long-handled fork. "Par-boiled, ye ken, an' crisped in a brisk oven — "

A rush of flying feet; the bang of closing door; a sound of stifled, hysterical laughter.

"Losh, man Jack," exclaimed Sir Hector, staring into his companion's scowling visage, "was yon that Rose creature?"

"Yon was!" answered Sir John grimly. "And what then, Hector?"

"Umph-humph!" snorted General Sir Hector Lauchlan Maclean.

"Pray, Hector, what might you mean?"

"Supper, John! Tripe an' pig's-trotters — aye, an' cooked by my ain hand, whateffer — the smell o' yon wad mak' Lucullus watter i' the mou'! Sae dinna froon, lad, but come an' eat!"

## CHAPTER V

### The Allure of Simplicity: Moonlight and an Elopement

"Betty lass," exclaimed my Lady Herminia, surveying her handsome features in the travelling-mirror, "Old Drury hath lost a notable and vastly clever actress in me! I ha' played the innocent country wench to such infinite perfection of admiration that the poor fool languishes already . . . ogles my charms and talks — of my soul! Oh, a dangerous man, Bet, a wicked wretch — one o' your soft-spoke, smooth-tongued, dove-eyed, silky, seducing monsters — a very serpent of iniquity, child! But I 'm no poor, meek, bread-and-butter miss to be lured to shame or whispered to destruction by any such perfidious and patent villain, not I, Bet!"

"Oh no, my lady!" nodded placid Betty. "No, indeed, mam, heaven knows you 'm a sight too clever an' knowin' — "

"Knowing, woman! Ha, what d' ye mean by 'knowing,' pray?"

"La, I don't know, my lady . . . I only know as you know yourself a match for any fine gentleman, villain or no, ever and always, mam — "

"'S bud, but I should hope so, Bet, especially this poor creature!"

"Aye, to be sure, but . . . O my lady, if he be truly dangerous — "

"Tush! I know the breed, and forewarned is forearmed. And he mistaketh me for a country simpleton dazzled by his fine airs! So I intend to make it my duty to teach him a shrewd lesson, Betty."

"Yes, mem, but how?"

"I intend to lower his pride, girl — to shame him cruelly."

"Why, then, 'tis as good as done, mam. But—"

"I'll drag his insufferable self-esteem in the dust . . . through the mud . . . trample it 'neath my feet . . . make him a mock—a jest and byword."

"I'm sure you will, my lady, but how?"

"How, Bet? Why, by running away with him to begin with, for sure."

"O mem!" ejaculated Betty, lifting imploring hands. "O my dear lady—"

"Woman, don't wail—'tis useless! I regard this as a sacred duty, girl!"

"But . . . O lud, my lady . . . think o' your ladyship's good name . . . the scandal—"

"One must be prepared to suffer in the high cause of duty, Betty child . . . and besides, my name will be Rose Ashton!"

"But, O my lady, if you run away—what o' me?"

"You will proceed towards Paris in the coach as I ha' told you, child! You will be quite safe with Giles and the footmen. And this minds me, the coach should be ready, and the sooner you start the better. Go down and bid Giles prepare for the road immediately. Stay, you cannot in all that finery! We'll send Rose instead!" And away sped my lady accordingly, quite deaf to Betty's reproachful wailings.

Thus Sir John, toying gloomily with knife and fork, was presently aware of stir and bustle within the house and of stamping hoofs and rumbling wheels without: wherefore he arose and crossed to the window in time to see Rose's mistress, muffled to the eyes, clamber into the great four-horsed travelling-chariot, followed by Rose herself similarly attired; he watched the footmen close the door, put up the steps and swing themselves into the rumble, heard the hoarse command of the driver, a sudden clatter of straining hoofs, and away rolled the cumbrous vehicle towards Paris.

"And despite her chin!" sighed Sir John within himself. "Poor, silly, innocent child! Ah well, perchance

her prayers and little cross may avail. Heaven send it so —"

Here he was roused by a huge hand on his shoulder and Sir Hector's voice in his ear:

"Och-heigh! Are ye wearyin' for Parus — sae sune, John?"

"Paris? Ha — 't is a sink of iniquity!" he retorted so fiercely that Sir Hector peered.

"Ou aye," he nodded. "'T is a' that, laddie, and yet ye contrived tae pit up wi't for five lang year." At this Sir John frowned and was silent. "Aweel, aweel," quoth Sir Hector, "there's England waitin' ye, aye, and happiness, I trust —"

"Happiness!" repeated Sir John scornfully.

"Why not, lad? 'T is time ye married and settled doon —"

"Horrific thought!" growled Sir John.

"Why, then, John," quoth Sir Hector, his English suddenly very precise, "you might begin to take an interest in your own affairs, particularly your estates; they are damnably mismanaged, I hear, more especially at High Dering . . . where you were born and your mother died . . . sweet soul!"

"High Dering!" repeated Sir John. "I' faith it seems a far cry to the old house — the green slopes of Firle and our good South Downs! 'T is long since we saw 'em together, Hector?"

"Yes, John, it is seven years and more since you left High Dering for London and the modish world. And to-day, lad, instead of being a plain country gentleman content in the prosperity of your tenants, here you stand a man of fashion, a town gallant full of polite airs and tricks and graces, but curst unhappy by your looks — while High Dering is going to the devil!"

"'T is mismanaged, you say, Hector? And yet Sturton, my bailiff, seems to do very well —"

"Oh, excellent well, John, for you — and himself! But 't is vastly otherwise with your tenantry, I hear."

"You contrive to hear a great deal, Hector, one way or another!"

"No, just in the one way, lad, with my ears. Ye see, Nature gi'e me eyes an' lugs an' I use 'em—"

"And you tell me Sturton is a rogue?"

"I say go and see for yourself, John. Get ye to High Dering and look, John, listen—and act!"

"I will, Hector. The peace and quiet of the place will be grateful, besides."

"Ye'll no' find it sae peaceful, lad, nor yet sae quiet whateffer!"

"Why, pray?" demanded Sir John, with sudden interest.

"Well, John, ye'll ken the name o' Lord Sayle, I'm thinkin'?"

"Aye, I do!" nodded Sir John, his interest deepening. "I've heard he has 'been out' rather frequently—"

"Losh, man, he has that! A wild, desp'rit, duelling body wi' reputation as unsavoury as—as y'r ain, John, but wi' this difference—he fights tae kill an' generally pinks his man. He's ane o' y'r gentlemanly rapscallions wha'll insult ye vera politely, y'ken, an' kill ye vera genteelly into the bargain if ye dare tae tak' offence."

"So I've heard, and what then, Hector?"

"John, the man's leeving within half an hour's ride o' y'r ain park gates. After killing the young Marquis of Torwood last year, London grew too hot, so my lord marched bag and baggage to his Sussex estate, and there he's lived ever since—aye, and a place of unholy riot he keeps there, as I hear. An' what's more, John, what wi' his desp'rit proneness tae bluidshed, there's few tae gainsay him, y'ken—his will is law in the South Country these days."

"'S bud!" murmured Sir John. "'S life, but I begin to yearn for the country more than ever!"

"Hoot, laddie, hoot-toot, ye'll no' be sic a fule tae pick a quarrel juist for y'r ain vanity an' vainglory, Johnnie? The man's good a sworder as ye'sel'—"

Sir John laughed and, reaching up, straightened Sir Hector's periwig that had worked itself rather more askew than usual.

"Tush, man!" said he. "Sure you know that your true duellists take most particular pains to avoid each other. Shall dog eat dog? And I detest bloodshed, Hector. I prefer pen to sword — and that reminds me we have not as yet determined on an apt rhyme to 'soul'!" And out came Sir John's unfinished script. "The work is in ode form, and, so far as it goes, is well enough. Pray sit down, Hector; the night is young — listen and judge for yourself."

"Na, na, John!" answered Sir Hector, retreating to the door. "I hae no ear for po'try, ye ken — so I'll awa' tae bed and leave ye to't, lad. But dinna sit too long — for we maun be up betimes. Guid-night."

Left alone, Sir John tossed the unfinished ode into the fire and, having watched it flare to ash and vanish up the wide chimney, sat awhile in thought. Gradually the place above and around him grew hushed, voices died away, busy feet grew still; the inn sank to rest. But Sir John sat on staring into the dying fire, deep-plunged in brooding thought. So lost was he that he heard no sound of opening door, of light footstep, until roused by a soft touch; he started and glanced up, to behold her of whom he was thinking.

Meekly she stood before him, clad for the road in a long, hooded cloak, with a bundle in her hand, a very small bundle tied up in a neckerchief.

"Rose!" he murmured.

"Here I be, sir," she answered timidly. "An' now what will your honour please to do wi' me?"

Instinctively Sir John arose, but stood mumchance, for once in his life speechlessly perplexed; perceiving which, she continued demurely:

"If your honour is ready to go, I am."

"To go?" he repeated. "Aye, but whither, child?"

"I . . . I thought you would know best, sir," she an-

swered, "But wherever it be, the sooner we start the better."

"What 's your hurry, Rose?"

"'T is my mistress, sir — the moment she misses me, she 'll come a-galloping back to find me, y' see; she do rely on me for her curls an' complexion, your honour."

"Ah," murmured Sir John, "two highly necessary things to any woman o' fashion! She will doubtless fly back in quest of 'em."

"Then pray let us go, sir."

"Aye, but how? Here is no sort of conveyance unless it be a posting nag. Can you ride, girl?"

"No, sir."

"A-pillion?"

"I should tumble off, sir. . . . But we 've got legs, your honour — "

"Limbs, child!"

"An' I be a good walker an' main strong, sir — "

"Aye, as a goddess o' the groves and fountains, Rose."

"An' 't is a mortal fine night, your honour! And look at the moon — so splendid an' all!"

"Splendid indeed, Rose!" And, opening the lattice, Sir John leaned out into a radiant night very calm and still — breathed an air soft and fragrant, saw the gleaming highway barred and fretted by the black shadows of the sombre trees — a magically alluring road, a way mysterious to woo the adventurous.

Sir John sighed and drew in his head.

"Y' are very right, child; the sooner we start the better! In the corner yonder you will find my cloak and pistols; pray bring 'em whiles I scribble a line to my friend." And sitting down forthwith he took pen and paper and indited the following epistle:

"My dear Hector, — I have departed for England, but will meet you in High Dering at the earliest moment, where you shall inquire for one, John Derwent. Meanwhile I am, as ever, thy wholly devoted, loving

John Dering.

P.S. — I have taken the girl Rose with me."

Having duly sealed and directed which missive, he arose, took up his pistols, examined flint, charge and priming and thrust them into the capacious pockets of his riding-coat; then he enveloped himself in the cloak, softly unbarred and opened the door and, hat in hand, bowed his companion out of the silent inn.

"Come, child," said he, "let us, confident in Fate and each other, seek the unknown together, nothing doubting."

## CHAPTER VI

### Of Souls, Solitude and a Dusty Road

Very soon they had lost sight of the inn and the magic of the night was all about them, a night of vasty stillness wherein the leaves hung motionless and none moved but themselves, and with no sound to break the slumberous quiet save the tread of their feet. Before them stretched the tree-bordered road leading away and away to distances vague and mysterious, a silvery causeway fretted by purple-black shadows, with, to right and left, a wide prospect of rolling, wooded country.

Sir John walked in serene and silent contemplation of earth and heaven until his companion, as though awed by the all-pervading stillness, drew a little nearer and spoke in hushed voice:

"'T is dreadful solitary, sir!"

"It is, child," he answered, his gaze still wandering; "but mine is a nature that craves solitude and, at times, I am possessed of a very passion for silence."

"Is this why your honour went and lived in Paris?" she questioned softly.

Sir John's wandering gaze fixed itself hastily upon the speaker, but her face was hidden in enveloping hood.

"One can find solitude anywhere, Rose," he retorted.

"Can one, sir?"

"To be sure, child! 'Mid the busiest throng, the gayest crowd, one's soul may sit immune, abstracted, in solitary communion with the Infinite."

"Aye, but — can souls sit, your honour?" she questioned.

Once again Sir John's roaming gaze focused itself upon his companion, and when he spoke his voice sounded a trifle pettish.

"'T was but a figure of speech, girl! Souls, being abstractions, ha' no need to — tush! Why a plague should we puzzle your pretty head with metaphysics? What know you o' the soul, child — or I, for that matter?"

"Not much, your honour," she answered submissively. "Though parson do say the soul is more precious than much fine gold."

"Have you a soul, I wonder, Rose?"

"I . . . hope so, sir."

"Then look before you, child, and tell me what you see."

"A dusty road!" she sighed.

"And is it nothing more to you, girl? Doth it strike no deeper note? Do you not see it as a path mysterious, leading to the unknown — the very symbol of life itself? And yet, poor child, how should you?" he sighed. "Let us talk of simpler things."

"Oh, thank ye kindly, sir," she sighed. "An' I should like to hear about yourself, an 't please your honour."

"Rose!" he exclaimed in sudden dubiety.

"Yes, your honour?"

"I . . . I wish to heaven you would not muffle your face in that pestilent hood!"

Mutely obedient, she pushed back the offending headgear, and Sir John, beholding the stolid placidity of her, the serene eyes and grave, unsmiling mouth, grew a little reassured.

"Pray what would you learn of so simple a creature as myself?" he demanded.

"As much as you 'll tell me, sir. 'Deed, I don't even know your honour's name — except that 't is John."

"Then call me John."

"Nay, sir, I could n't be so bold to take such liberty! You a grand gentleman an' me a poor maid in service!"

"But I 'm in service also, Rose," he answered. "Indeed we all are, more or less. I particularly so."

"You!" she exclaimed, turning to stare at him. "You in service! Who with?"

"A rather difficult, very exacting person named Sir John Dering."

"Him!" she cried, and immediately began to walk faster than before. "But," she questioned suddenly, stopping to view him up and down, "but — your grand clothes?"

"His, Rose! Sir John's — borrowed for the occasion!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and walked on again.

"As for my name, you'll find I shall answer readily to John Derwent."

"John?" she repeated. "T is the same as your master's!"

"You may call me 'Jack,'" he suggested.

"Being Sir John Dering's servant, you will know all about him and his evil ways?"

"None better, child."

"Is he so wicked as they tell?"

"Faith, child, no man could be; 't were beyond all finite achievement, and Sir John is only human!"

"But," said she, her eyes fiercely accusing, "he — murders men!"

"Not often, child," he answered lightly.

"He fights duels!"

"But only when necessary."

"He hath broke poor women's hearts!"

"Only such as were cracked."

"You are his champion, it seems?"

"Because he hath none other — a poor, lonely dog with a bad name, child, a solitary creature for the kicks and buffets o' the world! Doth not your woman's heart yearn to such?"

But instead of answering she clasped his arm in sudden terror.

"Look!" she whispered. "There's something there . . . moving in the shadows — a man!"

"Two men, child!" he whispered back. "I've been watching 'em for some time."

"What . . . what will they do to us?"

"That depends. Art afraid, child?"

"Yes . . . yes—" she gasped.

"Then pretend you are not—as I do! Come, step out, and go on talking."

As they walked on thus, she, stealing terrified glances, saw how these vague yet sinister shapes began gradually edging towards them, nearer and nearer, crouching forms that moved on soundless feet—closer and closer, until she had a vision of sordid, skulking, ragged misery, of murderous desperation, hunger-fierce eyes, the grim silhouette of a bludgeon, the evil gleam of a stealthy knife—

And then, with sudden, swift leap, Sir John was upon them, and she saw him fronting them, a pistol thrust into each pallid, shrinking face—

"Rose!" he called. "Rose, come hither, child!"

Instinctively, and despite the terror that shook her, she obeyed. "Good girl!" quoth he, with an approving nod. "I' the right-hand pocket o' my waistcoat you will find five or six guineas; take two and bestow 'em upon the poor rascals for affording us a sensation." Trembling still, she carried out Sir John's instructions, who, with a brief word and imperious gesture, commanded the astonished rogues begone. Nor did they need a second bidding, but flitted away on silent feet, though oft turning pallid faces to stare their amazement ere they vanished into the shadows whence they came.

"Rose, child," quoth Sir John, uncocking and repocketing his pistols, "I am pleased with thee. 'S heart, I 'm vastly pleased with thee! I rejoice that being fearful you commanded your fear and neither shrieked, swooned, squeaked, moaned, laughed, wept or fell to a fit o' the vapours. Thank God, child, that thou 'rt a fine, buxom, lusty country wench, sound o' wind and limb, all wholesome flesh and blood and bone—"

"Oh, fie—hush and ha' done!" she exclaimed, tossing her handsome head. "You make me sound as I were a prize cow!"

"Tush!" he laughed. "I do but take your body first. As to your mind — "

"I ha' none — so never mind!" she retorted bitterly, and making the most of her stately height.

"Aye, but I do mind," he answered seriously. "I mind infinitely, because 't is your mind needeth a great deal o' painful care. 'S life, girl, were your mind the peer o' your body you 'd be a creature without peer. The which, sounding paradoxical, is yet very truth."

"'Stead of which," she retorted angrily, "I am only a buxom country wench . . . a poor maid, as you think, all body an' no soul, an' talk of as she were a piece o' cattle! Oh, I could cry wi' shame, I could!"

"Then I shall kiss you, Rose!"

"You — ah, you would n't dare!"

"Not unless you cry, child. I can endure a woman's scorn, her fleerings, even her caresses — but her tears melt my adamantine fortitude quite. So pray do not weep, Rose. And as for your sweet country ways, your rustic simplicity, God bless you for 'em. With your goddess-form uncramped by cursed, 'prisoning whalebone — with no rusks or busks or such damned contrivances to pinch your figure to the prevailing mode you are as the hand of Nature moulded you, a woman apt to motherhood, and therefore to be reverenced . . . and a curse on all rusks."

"They are called busks, your honour, and I wear 'em!" she retorted.

"Howbeit, as you walk beside me now, Rose, free-limbed as a nymph, fragrant with naught but health, you are a thousand times more alluring than any modish lady laced to suffocation and ready to sink, to swoon, to languish and vapour accordingly on the least provocation."

"I 'spose you 've endured a vast deal o' such ladylike weaknesses, sir?" she questioned.

"To an infinity o' weariness!" sighed Sir John. "That is to say, my master hath, and I ha' suffered with him."

"Your master be a great beau, my mistress says, and mighty successful wi' the ladies — French ladies! But my mistress do say as Sir John Dering's nothing in particular to look at — a plain, insignificant little man!"

"Insignificant, girl!" Sir John nearly tripped over one of his spurs. "Insignificant!" he repeated. "Oh, begad! But then, child, 'twas easy to recognise your mistress for a person of little taste and no discernment, poor soul! An insignificant little man!" he repeated for the second time, and then laughed joyously. "And yet, Rose, sink me but she's right!" quoth he. "For in many particulars you behold in me the very reverse and opposite of Sir John Dering."

"And yet his clothes do fit 'ee to admiration!" she added.

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, and walked in silence awhile and, beholding the moon near to setting, sighed; as her tender light waned, his gloom waxed, for the countryside seemed to lose something of its magic allurement; moreover, his long riding-boots, elegantly light though they were, began to irk him, and the faint, monotonous jingle of his spurs irritated him so that at last he must needs pause to unbuckle them.

"A pedestrian in spurs is a pitiable object, Rose," he explained, "and their jingle upon a toilsome road is deuced dismal!"

"An' I be that weary I could weep!" she sighed.

"Don't!" he admonished. "Your weariness I can endure with an effort, but your tears — There, take my arm, child, lean on me — so!"

"An' I don't know where you 'm a-takin' me."

"To England, sure!" he answered encouragingly. "To Sussex, to the gentle Down-country — home!"

"You can't!" she sighed. "Ye see, I ha' no home."

"Your mother — father?"

"I — I'm an orphan wi' no one in the world — except a grandmother."

"Then your grandmother be it."

"Her 'll only clout me for leaving my lady an' losing a good place. And you — you 'd be glad to be quit o' me already."

"My poor child," said he in changed tone, becoming aware how painfully she limped, "you are worn out!"

"And your voice sounded kind!" she answered, turning to look at him; and he saw the cold, austere beauty of her face transfigured by a sudden tenderness so new and unexpected that he was amazed.

"Why — why, Rose," he stammered, "you can be more — much more than merely handsome."

"See," she whispered, "the moon 's a' most down — 't will be dark soon!"

"Nay, child, in a little 't will be dawn; you have walked with me all night. And this is the most desolate part of the road as I remember — never an inn, or cottage or bed for you, my poor girl!"

"The ditch will serve," she sighed, "for indeed I can go no farther."

"Nay, I will lodge you better than that . . . there 's a haystack i' the field yonder, if you can walk so far?"

"I 'll try!" said she between her teeth; but, catching her foot in a wheel rut, she staggered and uttered a cry of pain. And then Sir John had caught her up in his arms and bore her, albeit very unsteadily, across the stretch of meadow. Reeling and stumbling, he reached the haystack at last, and, setting her down, leaned to gasp and catch his breath.

"A goddess is . . . an awkward burden . . . for a . . . mere human man!" he panted.

"Especially if she be 'buxom!'" she added, with a little unsteady laugh. "Oh, but you are kind! And stronger than you look! I should n't ha' let you . . . but me so tired . . . and the pain! I think I shall cry!"

"Aye, do!" he pleaded, and reached for her hands. But she laughed instead, and bade him show her where she must sleep. Therefore Sir John tossed off his cloak, and by dint of some labour had soon burrowed a niche in

the stack where she might lie softly couched on fragrant hay.

Being within this niche and Sir John going to cover her with his long riding-cloak, she would have none of it unless he shared it with her; so at last down they lay side by side.

"Close your eyes and go to sleep, child!" he murmured. "Sleep you secure . . . for I . . . will watch . . . awhile . . ." But, even as he spoke, his eyes closed and he sank to heavenly slumber. Yet after some while he awoke, conscious of an intolerable unease, and, groping for the cause, found himself lying upon a pistol. The day was breaking, and by the gathering light he saw this pistol for none of his; a small, silver-mounted weapon, very apt for concealment — say in the folds of a long grey cloak.

She lay deep-plunged in slumber, her face concealed by the hood of this same grey cloak and naught to see of her save one hand, a slim, shapely hand, very white and delicate; observing which hand, its pink, soft palm, its long, taper fingers and rosy, polished nails, Sir John's eyes grew suddenly keen, his lips grim as, lying down again, he stared on the brightening dawn; slowly his grim look vanished and, smiling enigmatically, he fell asleep again.

And presently up came the sun to transform a myriad dewdrops into so many scintillating gems and make a glory of the world; to rouse the birds and fill them with the gladness of a new day; to kiss the slumberous eyes of her who stirred sighfully in the comfort of her grey cloak, and waking to a glory of sunshine and carolling birds, sat up suddenly, peering eager-eyed at him who lay beside her very fast asleep and with a faint, enigmatic smile upon his lips.

## CHAPTER VII

### Which Introduces My Lord Sayle and the Clash of Steel

Sir John rubbed the sleep from his eyes to behold his companion approaching, evidently fresh from her morning ablutions; moreover, her sprigged petticoat, if a little rumpled, looked surprisingly trim, her square-toed, flat-heeled shoes were innocent of dust and she had even contrived to comb and dress her hair — black, glossy hair, he noticed, that fell in wanton curls on either white temple. And, seeing her so neat and trig from top to toe, he immediately became supremely conscious of his own rumpled garments, his unshaven chin and the haystalks entwined in the tangled ringlets of his peruke. None the less, he rose and bowed with his usual grace, giving her a cheery "Good morning."

"'S heart, child!" he exclaimed, "you walk proud as Dian's self or lady o' high degree, God save your ladyship!" And he bowed again with an exaggerated flourish, at which she frowned and answered sullenly:

"You 'm asleep and dreaming, I think!"

"Aye, belike I am, wench," he answered gaily. "I dream you sweet, gentle and great o' soul — and dreams ever go by contrary, for thy looks are sour, thy speech ungracious and thy soul — ha, thy soul, child!"

"What of 't?"

"'T is the unknown quantity! How, dost frown yet, my Rose? Is it for anger or hunger?

O Rose of love, O fragrant rose
  Thy visage sheweth me
The source of all thy present woes
Is that thy stomach empty goes,
  So filled it soon shall be.

Bethink thee, Rose, the joys in store — ham, beef, beer . . . base material things to appal the soul and yet — how comfortable, how irresistible to your human maid and man! So ha' patience, sweet wench, ha' patience till I have laved me, combed me and found us an inn. Meantime sit ye and list to the birds, commune you with Nature whiles I go wash in the brook yonder."

And away he strode, blithe and debonair despite the straws in his wig, leaving her to bite red underlip and frown after him until a clump of willows hid him from view. Then, coming to the niche in the haystack, she began to seek in angry haste, wholly unconscious that Sir John was watching her from his screen of leaves, keen-eyed, and with the enigmatical smile curling his grim mouth. Thereafter he proceeded with his toilet at a leisured ease.

So long was he indeed that she came thither impatiently at last, to find him seated upon grassy bank, his great periwig upon one fist, doing his best to smooth its rebellious disorder with an ivory pocket-comb of pitifully inadequate proportions.

"Are ye going to be all day?" she demanded.

"I hope not," he sighed, tugging at a refractory tangle.

"You 'll never do it that way, fool!" she exclaimed.

"Your pardon, madam," he answered gravely, "but I shall, if I sit here till the trump o' doom — "

"You 're a nice gentleman's servant!" quoth she scornfully. "You don't even know how to use a comb — "

"I have my own method!" he retorted.

Her answer was to snatch the wig, pluck from him the comb and show him with contemptuous elaboration how it should be done, while Sir John, leaning back against a convenient tree, watched her with respectful interest.

"If I had only thought to bring a razor!" he murmured, feeling his stubbly chin.

"You look mighty ordinary without your wig!" said she, viewing him with coldly disparaging glance. "Very ordinary . . . and insignificant!"

Sir John sighed and shook his head.

"No man is a hero to his valet!" he answered, whereat she tossed wig and comb at his feet and turned her back on him.

Sir John put on his peruke, settled it with nicest care, stroked the long, glossy curls, and rose.

"Many thanks!" quoth he. "But for my chin I should feel well-nigh respectable. And now permit me to return this trifle, which 't is likely you have been diligently a-seeking."

Glancing round, she saw that he was tendering the silver-mounted pistol. "I found myself lying upon it as I slept," he explained. "'T is a pretty toy, yet deadly enough — at close quarters. 'T was vastly wise in you to arm you before trusting yourself to — my honour. I commend your extreme discretion. It must be a comfort to you to know you can blow my head off whenever you think necessary, or feel so disposed! Come, take your pistol, child — take it!" But, seeing she merely frowned, he thrust the weapon into the pocket of her cloak whether she would or no.

"So there you stand, Rose," he smiled, "thrice, nay, four times armed — by your prayers, your little cross, a pistol and . . . your innocence! 'Faith, child, you should be safe enough o' conscience! Come, then, let us go seek breakfast."

And now as they trudged along he talked of birds and the wayside flowers, of which it seemed he knew much; but finding she only frowned or yawned as the whim took her, he quickened his pace.

"Why will ye hurry a body so — I be all breathless!" she protested at last.

"I would haste to feed you, sweet Rose; 't will render you less thorny, mayhap — and a little better company." At this she stopped to frown and clench her fists, whereupon he promptly seized the nearest and patted it kindly.

"A pretty hand, Rose," said he, "a slim, white, soft, shapely little hand, and yet useful for all its idle looks."

"I hate you!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"God bless you, child, I believe you do!" he answered. "But the birds sing, the sun shines, and I shall enjoy my breakfast none the less, which, if I remember this road aright, is none so far to seek!"

Sure enough, rounding a bend, they presently espied a large posting-inn astir with bustle and excitement; horses stamped, chains rattled, ostlers ran to and fro, voices shouted; from all of which it was to be surmised that important company had lately arrived or was about to depart.

Threading his way through all this confusion, Sir John beckoned to a large and somewhat pompous person.

"Landlord," quoth he, "three-quarters of an hour hence you will have a coach and post-horses at the door. Meanwhile — breakfast!"

Sir John was his usual gentle, imperious self — but his chin was unshaven, his boots and clothes dusty; wherefore mine host's bow was perfunctory and his manner somewhat off-hand when he "regretted he was unable to oblige Monsieur, as the only fresh team of horses was already commanded for a great English milord — it was distressing, *mais que voulez-vous!* As for breakfast, it was to be had within — Monsieur must pray excuse him, he was busy!" Sir John, completely forgetful of clothes and chin, was staring amazed and a little shocked by the landlord's extraordinary lack of respectful and instant obedience, when his companion twitched him by embroidered cuff and, turning, he wondered to surprise a look on her face that might have been exultation, and there was suppressed excitement in her voice and gesture as she pointed to a coat-of-arms emblazoned upon the panels of an elegant travelling-chariot that stood near by.

"Look yonder!" said she. "Oh, 't is small use you expecting horses if this English lord wants 'em. Ye see, I know who he is — look there!"

"A vulgar display of paint!" nodded Sir John, glancing at the coat-of-arms. "Pray what of it?"

"That coach belongs to my Lord Sayle!"

"And pray, what then?"

"When he wants anything he generally gets it," she answered.

"And why is he so cursed, child?"

"Because nobody dare gainsay him!"

Now hearing the taunt in her voice, reading it in her look, Sir John's blue eyes grew suddenly very keen and bright, then he laughed a little bitterly.

"You think 't is time one dared the fellow, perhaps. Ah, Rose, had we Sir John Dering with us, were my master here—"

"'T would be a new experience for him to meet—a dangerous man!" she retorted.

"Indeed, child, you grow a little bloodthirsty, I think!" he sighed. "Rest you here a moment. I must speak a word with master landlord."

Left alone, she stood to stare after Sir John's slender, light-treading figure, then, turning about, entered the inn.

The place was full of stir and bustle, so, pulling her hood about her face, she mounted the stair, but paused at sound of riotous merriment from a room near by; she was standing thus hesitant, when a vigorous arm was clasped suddenly about her and, all in a moment, she was half-carried, half-dragged to a certain door which, swinging wide, discovered three gentlemen at their wine, chief among them one who sat at the head of the table, resplendent in sky-blue coat and flaxen periwig that framed a handsome, arrogant face, bold of eye, full-lipped and square of chin; a gentleman who bore himself with a masterful air and who now, setting down his glass, leant suddenly forward to stare at her who stood shrinking beneath the fixity of his gaze.

"By Venus and all the Loves!" he exclaimed. "Whom ha' you there, Huntley?"

"A bird o' price, Sayle! Ha' n't I caught a pretty bird, then?"

"Smite me!" exclaimed his lordship, viewing the captive in growing amaze. "Burn me if I ever saw such a

resemblance! She might be the proud Barrasdaile herself were she a little less vulgarly robust — less redundant in her curves, d' ye see. Bring her hither, Huntley man!"

"Damme, no, Sayle — she 's mine!"

"Damme, yes, sir, she belongs to all! In her we greet her bewitching prototype, in her rustical image we 'll adore and pay homage to her of whom she is the very spit, the breathing likeness — 'the Barrasdaile' herself. Since the haughty beauty is beyond our reach, this countrified semblance of her shall serve our turn . . . she 's a dainty creature, I vow, with ruddy lips . . . a waist . . . a shape! Bring her hither, man! Nay — up on the table with her! Aye so, throned on the table she shall receive our worship!"

Despite struggles, supplications and bitter reproaches, she was hoisted to the table amid a hubbub of cheers and laughter and, standing thus, faced them — a wild creature, trembling with shame, rage and a growing fear.

And it was now that Sir John chose to open the door, pausing on the threshold, snuff-box in hand, to survey the scene with an expression of cold and passionless disgust until the company, a little taken aback by his sudden appearance, ceased their clamorous merriment to frown with one accord upon the intruder, and fiercest of all, my Lord Sayle.

"What the devil?" he demanded. "This is a private room, sir — get out and be damned!"

Sir John smiled, closed the door and leaned his back against it, whereat were murmurs and mutterings of angry surprise, and my Lord Sayle rose to his feet.

"Damme, is the fellow drunk or mad. . . . What d' ye want?" he demanded.

"Horses!" answered Sir John, and smiling affably at the angry company, helped himself to a pinch of snuff. And now the trembling captive, finding herself thus momentarily forgotten, sprang from the table and was at Sir John's elbow all in a moment; but he never so much as glanced at her, all his interest centred apparently in the

flaxen curls of my Lord Sayle's wig. "I am here, sir," he went on, closing and fobbing his snuff-box, "to inform you that, learning you had engaged the only horses available, and deeming my own need of 'em the more urgent, I have taken the liberty of countermanding the animals to my own use."

At this was a moment's amazed stillness, then my lord laughed fiercely and leaned across the table to glare, his nostrils unpleasantly dilated.

"You are assuredly an ignorant fool, sir," quoth he, "for 't is certain you do not — cannot know me!"

"Nor desire to, sir!" murmured Sir John.

"I am Sayle — Lord Sayle! You 'll have heard the name, I fancy?"

"And mine, my lord, is Derwent, and you will never have heard it, I am sure. But what has all this to do with horses, pray?"

"This, my poor imbecile — and hark 'ee, Mr. Derwent, I permit no man, or woman either for that matter, to thwart my whims, much less an unshaven young jackanapes like yourself! Therefore — and mark me! Unless you apologise instantly for your unbelievable impertinence and undertake to personally see that the horses are put to my chariot within the next ten minutes, I shall give myself the pleasure of horse-whipping you, here and now, before your trollop's pretty face. Come, Mr. Derwent, what d' ye say?"

Sir John's answer was characteristically gentle: "I say, my lord, that your manners are as gross as your person, and your person is infinitely offensive from any and every point o' view!"

Here ensued a moment of stupefied silence, a stillness wherein none moved for a space; suddenly my lord's chair went over with a crash, his clenched fists smote the air. "Lock the door, Amberley, lock the door!" he commanded in choking voice, "and give me a whip, somebody!"

"A whip?" repeated Sir John, faintly surprised. "Nay, sir, you have a sword, sure? And rumour says

you can use it. Come, pray let us try what you can do, though first we will ask the child here to be good enough to leave us awhile — "

"Ha, leave us, is it?" snarled my lord. "Damme, no; I say the handsome baggage shall stay to see you squirm! The table, gentlemen . . . give me room!"

Very soon, sufficient space having been cleared to satisfy his lordship, he tugged off the sky-blue coat, tossed it aside, kicked off his shoes and, laughing in arrogant assurance, drew his sword and stood waiting. Sir John made his dispositions with a leisured ease that set my lord swearing in vicious impatience, while his friends snuffed, nodded and watched the victim prepare himself for the inevitable outcome with more or less sympathy; in especial one, a long-legged, sleepy gentleman who, unheeding Lord Sayle's angry glare, approached Sir John and bowed.

"Sir," said he, "m' name's Amberley. It seems y' have no friend t' act for ye in case of — ah — of — "

"My sudden demise?" smiled Sir John.

"Precisely, sir. If you should wish any message d'livered t' any one — any commission o' the kind, shall be happy t' offer myself — name of Amberley, sir."

"Mr. Amberley, pray receive my thanks, but I have no message for any one — "

"Damnation!" cried my lord. "Is he ready, Amberley?"

"Quite!" murmured Sir John, and drawing his sword he tossed the scabbard upon the table, and approaching Lord Sayle, saluted and fell to his guard.

Slimmer than usual he looked as he stood thus gracefully poised, and of no great stature, yet, in that moment, observing his eyes and mouth, no one would have called him "insignificant" — especially one who leaned against the door, hands clenched, eyes wide, waiting for what was to be.

The narrow blades crossed, and immediately rose a thud of quick-moving, purposeful feet and clink of mur-

derous steel. Lord Sayle's onset was impetuous as usual, his attacks viciously direct and powerful; but time and again his darting point was met, his lightning thrusts parried, though only just in time, and as if more by accident than skill; noting which, he laughed scornfully and pressed his attack more fiercely; twice he forced Sir John to break ground until, espying an opening in his antagonist's defence after a wide parade, he lunged swiftly, gasped and, dropping his weapon, staggered with Sir John's blade transfixing his sword-arm from wrist to elbow.

And now was confusion: a wild ringing of bells, calling for water and sponges, running for lint and bandages, while Sir John did on his shoes, and eased himself into his tight-fitting riding-coat.

My Lord Sayle, a-sprawl in arm-chair while his friends washed and staunched his wounds, alternately cursed and groaned, heaping his late antagonist with passionate revilings and bitter invective until, what with anger and pain, his voice failed him at last.

Then Sir John spoke in chilling scorn:

"Thou contemptible thing! Thou man of straw! Egad, and can it be you set all London by the ears? 'S life, my lord, your fencing is like your manners, exceeding indifferent. I might ha' killed you any time I wished!"

My Lord Sayle struggled to his feet, raving like a madman and calling for his sword, until, constrained by his friends, he sank back in the chair and suffered their ministrations, but raving still.

"You shall suffer for this. . . . Aye, burn me, but you shall! This is but the beginning . . . we meet again . . . aye, by all the fiends in hell I'll ha' your life for this . . . you shall fight me again so soon as I am able!"

"With joy, my lord!" answered Sir John, wiping his blade on his lordship's sky-blue coat that chanced to lie handy. "'T was purely for this reason that I suffered you to live. Indeed, my lord, I hope to repeat the pleas-

ure of this little *rencontre* on every possible occasion until I run you out of England. And you should soon be well, for your wound, though painful, is nothing dangerous. One word more, my lord: as regards your sword-play, I should advise a few lessons at your weapon against our next meeting. Au revoir! Gentlemen, your servant!" Then, having bowed to the silent company, Sir John reached out his hand to her who stood leaning against the door. "Come, child!" said he, and led her out of the room, closing the door behind them; then she stopped to face him, her eyes bright, her ruddy lips a-quiver.

"Why . . . why did you fight — that beast?" she questioned breathlessly.

"'Faith, Rose, you heard! 'T was in the matter of post-horses."

"Horses!" she repeated. "And naught else?"

"Naught i' the world, child."

"Horses!" she panted, in sudden vehement scorn. "And you saw how he would have shamed me! You saw! But then, to be sure, I am but a country wench of none account. . . . I am merely a poor, friendless girl . . . but horses you can fight for, peril your life for, because —"

"Because horses are — horses, child, and the horse, you 'll remember, is a noble animal, man's faithful friend and servant —"

"Oh!" she cried, between clenched teeth. "Oh, I hate — despise you — Sir John Dering!"

"Ah, Rose, child!" sighed he. "Hast found me out so soon? 'What 's in a name?' quoth the bard. Alack, a vasty deal! say I. For, 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him!' runs the proverb, and methinks 't is true. So alack for poor Sir John Dering, whose name and reputation are beyond repair and might hang a thousand dogs. But thou 'rt hungry, child, and so is poor Sir John. Come, then, haste we to breakfast!"

But she never stirred, only she turned her back suddenly.

"What, Rose?" he exclaimed. "Why, child, you're never going to weep?"

"No!" she answered. "No!" and sobbed immediately.

Then Sir John turned her to face him, took her bowed head between his two hands, lifted it and kissed her upon the brow with a very reverent gentleness.

"Rose, child . . . sweet innocence," he sighed. "Never forget you ha' been kissed by the 'Wicked Dering.' And now, come your ways to breakfast!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### Of a Post-Chaise, Iniquity and a Grandmother

From blazing noon to twilight, from twilight to dusky eve, the lumbering coach had lurched and jolted its slow, laborious way, the ponderous wheels now rumbling over some bridge or culvert, now rattling upon loose, stony ways, now ploughing, well-nigh silent, through muffling dust. And my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, pushing back the hood of her grey cloak, yawned frequently and unashamedly, for she was weary of it all and more especially of her slumberous and annoyingly silent companion; the whole adventure was become disappointingly ordinary, and she heartily wished herself done with it.

At last, from his shadowy corner, Sir John spoke, and his voice sounded surprisingly wide awake:

"Art still asleep, child?"

"Is your honour pleased to be awake at last?" she retorted in bitter irony.

"Nay, Rose, whilst you slept I have sat here musing upon the mutability o' human affairs. We are straws i' the wind, child, leaves a-whirl upon the stream of life, borne hither and yon at Fate's irrevocable decree. What is to be, will be, let us strive and struggle how we will. And 't will soon be dark, so ha' your pistol ready —"

"I — I do not fear the dark!" she answered, quite forgetting to yawn.

"Nay, 't is not of the dark I warn you but of myself, child!" he sighed. "Great pity is it you should ha' found me out so soon, for as John Derwent I was in every sense a gentle, worthy and reverent soul, but — as Sir John Dering, 't is a vastly different matter, for the censorious world expects me to live up to, or down to, my reputation, so ha' your pistol ready, girl!"

"I do not — fear you either!" she retorted.

"Aha, Rose? You think this bad dog's bark is worse than his bite? You mayhap think of me as—"

"Of you, sir?" she exclaimed. "Nay, indeed, I think of—of my grandmother!"

"Her grandmother!" murmured Sir John. "Stupendous! In a dark coach, on a solitary road and with Iniquity threatening to pounce, she thinks of her grandmother! Oh, admirable Rose! And a grandmother, moreover, who will perchance clout the poor child! And yet the poor child should benefit thereby, for a clout in time saves nine. And yet—her grandmother! Iniquity, hide thy diminished head! Wickedness, abase thyself! John Dering, thou merciless profligate, forget thy so innocent, trembling victim and go to sleep; thy base designs are foiled by Innocence and a grandmother! So droop Depravity, despair Debauchery—sleep, John, sleep!" And Sir John yawned, stretched his legs, drew his cloak and, settling himself to his comfort, forthwith composed himself to slumber.

But it seemed my lady had no mind to permit this, for she tapped the floor with insistent foot, fidgeted with the blind, let down the window and closed it again noisily. But Sir John, having closed his eyes, kept them fast shut; whereupon my lady turned her back upon him pettishly, and frowned at the rising moon. But presently she stole a glance at her companion, and judging him truly asleep, slipped back her hood, shook her curls and slowly, gently, suffered herself to sway over towards him until her head was pillowed beside his. And after some while Sir John, vaguely conscious of a persistent tickling, opened drowsy eyes to find this occasioned by a lock of hair that stirred upon his cheek. Slowly and with infinite caution he drew a small leather case from his pocket, whence he abstracted a pair of scissors and therewith deftly snipped off this errant curl and, tucking it safely out of sight, returned the case to his pocket and closed his eyes again.

Was she asleep? Her breathing was deep and soft and regular, but—was she truly asleep? To ascertain

which fact he needs must edge himself round, though with elaborate care not to disturb her. And surely no slumber ever looked more unconsciously natural! . . . Yet she lay in the one and only posture where the rising moon might show him the classic beauty of her profile, the low brow, the delicate nose, vivid lips tenderly apart, the softly rounded chin.

Sir John scrutinised her, feature by feature, with such intensity that it seemed to trouble her dreams, for she sighed plaintively at last, stirred gracefully and finally, opening her eyes, sat up to smooth and pat her rebellious hair.

"Have I been asleep, sir?"

"'T is what I 'm wondering, Rose," he answered, seating himself opposite to her. "Howbeit you did it charmingly well. And now, since we are both awake, let us converse of your grandmother—"

"Pray when shall we reach Dieppe?" she demanded.

"Some time 'twixt now and dawn, if all goes well. But tell me of your grandmother."

Instead of answering, she turned to stare out of the window, and became so intensely unconscious of him that Sir John yawned again, and subsided into lethargic silence. So they rumbled and jolted on their weary way until the grind of wheels and creak of the leathern springs grew unbearable.

"Are ye asleep again?" she demanded at last.

"Nay, m' sweet creature," he answered drowsily. "I ruminate upon thyself and myself and will make thee a prophecy, as thus: Within the week, Paris, aye, and London belike, will ring wi' news of this my latest infamy; the modish world will have its ears tickled by scandalous tale of how the 'Wicked Dering' carried off to shameful purpose a poor, pretty, sweet and innocent serving-wench."

"But how — how should any one know?" she questioned a little breathlessly.

"Alas, my Rose," he sighed, "do I but sneeze the world hears on 't. I am dogged by a most unrelenting and scandal-mongering fate."

"What do you mean by fate?"

"A woman, Rose, a lady o' high degree who hath constituted herself my determined though somewhat hysterical Nemesis. She dedicated me to her vengeance five weary years ago, and ever since, when moved to by splenetic humours, for she is a vapourish lady, she hath wrought to such purpose that here am I fleeing back home to marry her —"

"To . . . oh . . . to . . . marry her?"

"Precisely! Why d' ye gasp, child?"

"But if she hath been . . . is . . . your enemy —"

"I will make her wife to the 'Wicked Dering'!"

"Are you so — so sure you can?"

"As sure as life, Rose!"

"Life is a thing most uncertain, I 've heard, Sir John!"

"Aye, but not till we 're dead, Rose."

"But how if she refuse you?"

"I ha' n't troubled to think o' that."

"Do you know her well?"

"So little that I have small doubts."

"Indeed? And how if she utterly scorn and contemn you? How if she make a mock o' you? How if she bid her servants drive you from her presence?"

"Don't gnash your pretty teeth, child! And if she so despitefully use me then should I come a-seeking thee, my Rose —"

"Me?" she stammered. "You — you 'd come — to me?"

"'T is most certain!" he answered. "But not as the notorious Sir John; 't would be as the meek, the gentle and reverent John Derwent I should woo until I won thee at last, sweet Rose o' love. Do but think on me as John Derwent and I will begin e'en now, humbly, tenderly, as only John Derwent might woo thee, thou fragrant Innocency."

"And what of — her — your enemy?"

"We would leave her to her vengeance, child, whiles thou and I —" Sir John paused suddenly to listen.

"Rose," said he, "d'ye hear aught?" And presently, sure enough, above the never-ceasing rumble of wheels, creaking of springs and jingle of harness, they distinguished the rhythmic throb of oncoming, galloping hoofs.

"Horsemen!" she exclaimed.

"One!" he corrected. "And do not be alarmed, it may be a friend — and yet it may not!"

Saying which, Sir John reached down one of his pistols from the slings and, lowering the window, leaned out.

The moon was sinking, but by her diminished light he descried a solitary horseman who galloped hard in the dust of their wheels and, dim-seen though he was in consequence, it needed but one glance at his height and width to reassure Sir John, who immediately called to his driver to stop; and very soon the horseman was alongside.

"What — Hector!" exclaimed Sir John joyously. "So you've caught us, have ye? A thousand welcomes!"

"Welcomes, is it?" quoth Sir Hector, reining nearer and shaking dust from every fold of his riding-cloak. "Welcomes whateffer — an' me nigh choked wi' your dust, and ye'sel' up tae a' manner o' deevilish ploys and riots — an' wounded gentlemen cursin' theirsel's intae fevers all along the road, and a' on your account, Master John Derwent!"

"Nay, merely one gentleman — of sorts, Hector! I had the fortune to meet with my Lord Sayle, who was somewhat ill-mannered — "

"Aye, but didna ye tak' the man's post-horses?"

"I perceive you ha' heard something of the matter, Hector."

"I hae that . . . and o' the lass, forbye! O John, John, is she wi' ye yet?"

"Indeed, Hector, safe and sound!"

"O man, are ye rin clean daft?"

"Never saner, Hector."

"A common, country serving-wench, puir lass. . . . O man John!"

"Nay, Hector, the most uncommon serving-wench that ever served since serving was or wenches were!"

"Hoot-toot — dinna palter wi' worrds, John! Think o' y'r reputation!"

"Nay, faith," sighed Sir John; "'t is so devilish blown upon, so warped and weatherbeaten that I had fain forget it. And as for my Rose — "

"Oh, shame, John, for shame!" exclaimed Sir Hector, falling into his precise English. "I had hoped you had left such wickedness behind in Paris with your scandalous marquises and such."

"Why, there it is, Hector; my Rose is such vast and welcome change to your fine ladies, for instead o' languishing, sinking or swooning with mock-modesty as your great lady should, she talks to me of — her grandmother! She is immaculate, Hector, Innocence incarnate — and I find her vastly edifying. And, egad, I 've kissed her but once, and that upon the brow — in all these miles! Come — how d' ye say to that?"

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector.

"Pray," questioned Sir John, "pray what might you mean exactly, Hector?"

"That I 'm no minded tae sit here choked wi' dust hearkenin' tae sermons on ye' ain virtues. . . . An' high tide at twa o'clock! Push on, man, push on, and ye s'all be in Sussex to-morrow's morn."

"In heaven's name, how?"

"Whisht, lad! I happen to know of a boat — juist a wee bit fishin'-boat, y' ken — as sails the nicht."

"'T is marvellous what you 'happen' to know, Hector!"

"Tush, man! Are ye for Sussex an' Cuckmere Haven to-morrow morn?"

"With all my heart."

"Then 'hurry 's' the word, John."

## CHAPTER IX

### Describes the Adventures of the *True Believer*

One o'clock was striking as they rumbled into the ancient town of Dieppe and pulled up before the posting-inn. Here Sir John, having paid and fee'd his driver, was for ordering supper, but Sir Hector would have none of it.

"Come awa', Johnnie," he insisted, "an' if ye're hungry, I'll find ye a red herring — mebbe a couple. Come awa'!"

"A herring? How say you, Rose child?" questioned Sir John, but my lady not troubling to answer, he tucked her hand within his arm and bade Sir Hector lead on.

"Ha — but the girl, John — ye'll no' be for draggin' the puir lassie awa' wi' ye tae sea — at midnight?"

"No, indeed, Hector; if she will not walk I must carry her. Howbeit, she comes to share my herring!"

"O John!" sighed Sir Hector; "O Johnnie man, I'm fair amazed at ye!" And shaking gloomy head he turned and strode on before.

Once out of the dim-lit innyard, darkness engulfed them, but Sir Hector strode unhesitatingly; along narrow streets he led them, beneath the grim shadow of frowning archways and buildings, through a maze of winding alleys and ill-paved byways, turning sudden corners until, all at once, they were treading firm sand and there met them a wind fresh and sweet with the salt tang of the sea. Presently before them, vague in the gloom, was a small bay or inlet with a jetty, and beyond this the dim bulk of a ship, a very silent craft with never a glimmer of light from stem to stern.

"John, bide ye here!" said Sir Hector softly, and strode forward, to vanish in the dark; then rose a sweet, flute-like whistle rendering the first bars of "Blue Bonnets over the Border," which was answered, after a little, by a hoarse voice in English:

"Be that your honour?"

"Aye, aye, Sharkie man, wi' twa friends. Send the boat!"

"Nay, I be comin' myself, sir!"

Followed a scrambling, scuffling sound, the dip of oars, creak of rowlocks and a mutter of voices, then Sir Hector called softly:

"This way, John."

With his companion's hand in his, Sir John advanced cautiously until, above the stones of the jetty, at his very feet, he visioned the dim outline of a human head that admonished him thus:

"Gi'e's a holt o' the young 'ooman, sir, an' easy it is!"

Here my lady manifested very decided unwillingness to be taken a "holt of," but was swung suddenly aloft in compelling arms, passed below to other arms and safely deposited in the stern-sheets of a swaying boat, then the others followed in turn, and they pushed off. Half a dozen strokes brought them to the side of a fair-sized vessel, and very soon my lady found herself set on deck, her hand securely tucked within Sir John's arm.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed, glancing aloft at dim-seen, raking masts; "But wherefore all this stealth and secrecy, Hector?"

"Whisht, man! Wha' gars ye tae say sic things o' honest fusher-folk? Ye're aboard the *True Believer*, Johnnie lad, juist a bit fushin'-boat out o' Newhaven."

"She's something large and heavily sparred for a fishing-boat, is n't she, Hector?"

"Gude sakes, John, and wha' d' ye ken o' fushin'-boats whateffer?"

"The *True Believer?* 'T is a strange name!"

"'T is a graund, godly name, John, an' she's owned by a godly man, a man as sings bass in the church choir, a worthy fushin'-body, as I ken fine. Dinna fash ye'self, John lad; wi' luck an' a favourin' wind we should be ashore a little after dawn."

"Why, then, this fishing-boat doth not fish to-night?"

"I'm no tellin' ye she will."

"But, Hector, if a fishing-boat fisheth not then fishing-boat she cannot be except she fish for other than fish, and yet, so fishing, she fisheth not truly, and truly can be no true fishing-boat—" But, finding Sir Hector had vanished, he drew his companion into a corner well screened from the wind, and here, despite the dark, contrived a seat with canvas and a coil of rope.

"Rose," said he, as they sat side by side, "it seems that some time to-morrow we shall have reached our journey's end and must say good-bye. Shall you miss me, child . . . grieve a little?"

For a moment she was silent, and when she answered her tone was primly demure.

"Oh, yes, sir, and indeed I shall, for your honour 's been mortal kind, I 'm sure!"

"Ha' done with your play-acting, girl!" said he so sharply that she started and would have risen, but his grip on her arm restrained her.

"Play-acting?" she repeated in altered voice. "How, sir? D' ye think—"

"'T is no matter, child," he answered lightly; "my thoughts are my own. But for a little space I would have you your best, most worthy self. To-morrow we part and may meet again but rarely . . . if ever. Shall you bear in your mind a kindly memory of me, Rose?"

"Yes," she answered gravely.

"When you shall hear wild tales of the 'Wicked Dering,' will you think of him as . . . as he is now . . . a man perchance a little better than he is painted?"

"Yes," she answered again, conscious of his dejected attitude though she saw his face but a pale blur in the gloom. "And will your honour be returning to Paris very soon?"

"No, child."

"To London?"

"Nor London. I intend to live in the country for awhile."

"Then why can't your honour see me now an' then?" Here she was aware that he had lifted his head and turned to peer at her.

"I shall be very . . . busy," he answered, with a strange pause between the two words.

"And will your honour have time to miss me?"

"Heaven knows it, child!" he answered, leaning nearer.

"And shall you be — always busy, sir?" she questioned softly, swaying towards him until, despite the darkness, he could behold all the witchery of her look. "Shall you think of me sometimes?"

"Often, Rose . . . as the most wonderful . . . of — serving-maids!" he answered, turning suddenly away.

"How wonderful?" she demanded.

"Vastly wonderful, child."

"What d' you mean by wonderful?"

"Just — wonderful; you fill me with wonder."

"What of, pray?"

"Yourself."

"Why?"

"Heavens, child! Just because you are a woman and possess a mind feminine, which is the wonder of wonders since 't is beyond the understanding of man or woman. As saith the song:

'The mind of a woman can never be known,
You never can tell it aright.
Shall I tell you the reason? — She knows not her own,
It changes so often ere night.
'T would puzzle Apollo
Her whimsies to follow,
His oracle would be a jest.
At first she 'll prove kind,
Then quickly you 'll find
She 'll change like the wind,
And often abuses
The man that she chooses;
And what she refuses,
Loves best!'

And there y' have it, child!"

"Oh, indeed, sir! But when a woman makes up her mind to hate she can be fiercely determined as any man —"

"Aye — until she remembers she 's a woman!"

"And what then, sir?"

"Then, child, she becometh truly dangerous!" he answered. "Now here 's you, my Rose, a sweet, simple, country maid that talks like Aspasia, Sophonisba, Pallas Athene and the Three Wise Women of Hunsdon — or Hogsden, or whatever it was — all rolled into one. Yet, child, thou couldst never truly hate, thine eyes are too gentle, thy lips too tenderly full, thyself too generously formed —"

"Meaning 'buxom,' I s'pose?"

"Juno-like, let us say."

"Pray, sir," she inquired, after another pause, "if your honour marries your enemy — the great lady —"

"When I marry her, child!"

"When your honour marries her — if she doth not wed another — will your honour still think of poor Rose?"

"My honour will, indeed!"

"Then 't will be wicked and dishonourable in your honour."

"But very natural! For indeed I think my honour might learn to love thee, child, could we but find thee a soul."

"Love?" she repeated a little scornfully. "Could Sir John Dering love any but Sir John Dering?"

"'S heart, child, your speech improves very marvellously at times; and let me perish, Rose, but you have an air that matches extreme ill with your homespun!"

"I . . . I ha'n't lived always i' the country, sir!" she retorted.

"And despite the mild innocence o' thy look, thou hast a temper and a tongue, Rose."

"I 'd be a poor, helpless creature without 'em, sir."

"As to my capacity for loving, I think I might love as well and truly as most, aye, even to the forgetting of

John Dering. For, hid within John Dering I am conscious of a soul, Rose, a soul so very much greater than John Dering that 't is great marvel John Dering is not greater than John Dering, seeing John Dering is the outward though very imperfect manifestation of John Dering's soul — a soul that will live and love and go marching on when poor John Dering is dust. And, look you! True love being not passion of the flesh but virtue o' the soul, 't is therefore sure that I, John Dering, shall some day love with a love exceeding great, a love as imperishable as John Dering's soul. How think you, my — " Here Sir John, chancing to lift his gaze, descried amidst the pervading gloom, a solid, round object that projected itself immediately above him from the roof of the deck-house behind; and, reaching up suddenly, he grasped a shock of coarse hair.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, and gave the dim head a shake; whereupon came a groping hand to rend and smite, a hand that shrank and vanished at the threatening click of Sir John's ready pistol.

"Who are you, rascal?" demanded Sir John.

"Nobody . . . only me!" quavered a voice in hoarse, wheedling tones. "So put up your wepping, sir!"

"What are you after?"

"Nothin', sir . . . only a-layin' by till all 'ands is turned up. So don't go shooting of a innocent wictim, sir."

"What d' ye mean by eavesdropping?"

"No sech thing, y'r honour . . . no, never in my life, sir. So away wi' your wepping."

"What 's your name, rogue?"

"Jonas, y'r honour, Jonas Skag, as honest a innocent as ever trod plank. So if y'r honour will put up y'r wepping and leggo my 'air kindly, I 'll be obleeged to your honour 'umbly."

Sir John loosed the wheedling Jonas with a final shake, uncocked and re-pocketed his pistol, and looked round to find his companion had risen.

"The rogue disturbed us," he sighed, "which is pity, for I was but warming to my theme. When I am upon the soul, and especially my own, I grow well-nigh lyrical. Let us sit down again and continue."

"Nay, I'm a-cold!" she answered, drawing her cloak. "Hark! I think they 'm getting ready to sail."

All about them was a hushed stir, a murmurous whispering, a thud of quick, soft feet, a flitting to and fro of dim forms, the faint sound of well-greased blocks and rousing-gear, the scarce-heard rattle of a chain, as the great yards rose slowly into the gloom above, and the anchor was hove.

"Yes," answered Sir John, "we are stealing away to sea, and never surely was it quieter done! Come, let us go forward and watch!"

Now it chanced that as they went she tripped suddenly, fell against him, and then he had her in his arms. Passive she lay in his clasp, her face upturned to his and, dark though it was, he saw the lure of those parted lips so near his own, the down-sweeping lashes, felt all the urge and coquetry of her.

"O Rose of love!" he murmured. "Were I any other than John Dering and thou any other than — thyself! O Innocence!" And uttering a strange, harsh laugh, he set her upon her feet. "Stand up, Rose, stand up!" he commanded. "And a heaven's name be more wary o' thy going. Come!" But she neither stirred nor spoke. "I might have kissed thee and — did not!" said he. "And for this, being very woman, thou 'rt like to hate me more than ever. Is 't not so?"

But, giving utterance to an inarticulate exclamation, she turned swiftly and left him.

As he stood looking after her, he was presently aware of a gigantic form looming beside him.

"Aha!" sighed he, slipping his hand within Sir Hector's arm. "Pray now resolve me this riddle, friend, namely and to wit: Why doth this 'True-believing' fishing-boat steal forth so silently a-fishing? Is it, think ye, that she may surprise the fish and take 'em in their sleep?"

"Havers, Johnnie man, dinna fash me wi' sic fule questions," answered Sir Hector. "B' my soul, I believe yo've fush on y'r brain, whateffer!"

"Mayhap, Hector, but I've one or two other things as well," sighed Sir John, drawing his cloak against the freshening breeze.

## CHAPTER X

### Further Concerning the Same

"Yonder breaks the dawn, Hector!"

"Aye, lad, and 't is an unco' inspirin' sicht tae watch the sun rise abune this weary waste o' waters like the speerit o' life. 'T is mony a sunrise I 've watched syne I was a wee bit laddie . . . an' 't is nae wonder 't was worshipped by the ancients as a god. . . . See, yonder he comes, a flamin' majesty! Could ony human mind conceive anything sae glorious, sae deevine, sae — Ten thousand deevils! Look yonder! Ahoy, Sharkie — Sharkie man!"

Glancing whither Sir Hector's long finger pointed, Sir John espied the top-gallant sails of a ship uprearing from the mists of dawn, topsails of radiant glory flushing from scarlet to pink, from pink to saffron, and so at last to shining gold. Slowly the vessel herself came into view, her high, clean bow, the line of her grinning gun-ports.

Suddenly from her fore-chase gushed roaring flame, and round shot hissed athwart the lugger's forefoot.

And now upon the *True Believer's* deck was a scurrying of men, silent no longer — men who cursed and laughed, shouting and pointing, yet never in each other's way, taking their appointed stations like the true sailor-men they were, and who stared, one and all, from their pursuer to the brown-faced, serene man who neither shouted nor pointed but stood with Sir Hector, gazing at the oncoming brig in dispassionate judgment of her pace — and all voices were hushed awaiting his command. When at last he spoke, his word was obeyed on the jump; reefs were loosed, shaken out and hauled taut, lee-stays eased, and the *True Believer*, heeling to the wind, drove hissing upon her course at increased speed.

"What ship 's yon, Sharkie man?" inquired Sir Hector of the imperturbable man beside him.

"'T is the *Seahorse* brig, y'r honour . . . ten guns out o' Ryde. . . . Must ha' been layin' hove-to hereabouts in the mist . . . waitin' for us, which is strange . . . strange! But there are n't a craft anywheres along the coast can forereach the *True Believer* on a wind — aye, or goin' free, much less yon lubberly brig!" quoth the placid Sharkie, balancing himself serenely upon the sloping deck.

"John!" cried Sir Hector, clutching a weather-brace in one hand and flourishing the other towards the speaker. "This is ma frien' Sharkie Nye, a man o' sound judgment except i' the doctrine o' Predestination! Sharkie man, this is Sir — umph! — John Derwent, wha' I ha' kenned from his cradle, and moreover, Sharkie — Losh, man — yon was nearish!" he exclaimed as a round-shot hummed between their raking masts.

"Aye, y'r honour, though I 've 'ad 'em nearer afore now!" nodded Mr. Nye; "but we 'll be out o' reach in a bit if none o' our gear is carried away or — " A rending crash, a whirr of flying splinters and a gaping rent appeared in the *True Believer's* bulwarks forward.

"That," quoth Mr. Nye, viewing the damage with calculating eye, "that were a bit nearer, sir. Forward there!" he roared suddenly. "Any on ye hurt?"

"Nary a soul, Sharkie!" a cheery voice roared back; "us du be layin' low-like!"

"The brig be gettin' 'er range on us," continued Mr. Nye, "which may mak' it a bit ark'ard for a minute or two, 'specially for the young 'ooman — best take 'er below, sirs." And away he lurched for a word with the steersman, while Sir John made his way to her who clung, staring wide-eyed at their oncoming, relentless pursuer.

"Rose," said he, "I will see you below!"

"Sir," she answered, "you will no such thing!"

"There is danger on deck here!"

"So is there below."

"Will you obey me?"

"Never!"

"Then I shall carry you."

"Then I shall kick!"

"Egad!" he exclaimed; "I believe you would!"

"I' faith, sir," she nodded, "I vow I should!"

Here, meeting each other's glance, they laughed; then he was beside her and had caught her hand.

"Rose child, if I begged you to leave the deck—"

"'Twould be of none avail!" she answered, her eyes very bright. "This is life!"

"And in the midst of life we are in death!" he retorted.

"Then if death come I prefer to die in the sun and wind."

"Ha' you no fear, child?"

"Not of death!"

"Of what, then?"

"Of myself!" she answered, turning to glance at their pursuer again.

"Why of yourself?" But ere she could reply he had leapt and dragged her beneath him to the deck as the guns roared again, followed by a clamour of shouts and cries forward, a confusion of dismayed shouting and a great flapping of rent canvas as the *True Believer*, swinging up into the wind, lay a fair target for the brig's gunnery. A shot furrowed her deck abaft the mainmast, another crashed through her bulwarks aft and, struck by a flying splinter, Sir Hector staggered and brought up against the lee-rail grasping at torn and bloody sleeve.

"Dinna fash ye'sel', John lad!" he panted, as Sir John leapt to him. "Toots, man, let be! 'T is nae mair than a wee scratch—though painfu' forbye. But wha's come tae a' the lads? Sharkie!" he roared; "Sharkie man, ye 'll no' strike tae the de'ils yonder?"

"Not me, y'r honour," answered Mr. Nye, signalling to the steersman, "leastways, not while I've a sail as will draw—"

"An' will ye let 'em shoot ye tae pieces an' gi'e 'em nothing in return? O man, hae ye no arteelery?"

"Aye, sir, a tidy piece under the tarpaulin yonder. But Lord love 'ee, sir, to fire agin a King's ship is treason, piracy, murder, Execution Dock and damnation—"

"What o' that, Sharkie? Wull ye look at me arrm?"

"I'll whip my neckerchief round it, y'r honour —"

"Ye'll no sic thing till I've tried a shot at yon deevils. Haul ye gun aft, Sharkie; I was an arteelery officer, y'ken —"

"No, no, y'r honour; we'll be on our course again so soon as we've rove new running-gear and —"

"Hoot, Sharkie — wull ye look at my arrm? An' see yonder, they're comin' up wi' us fast . . . their next broadside should sink us. Aft wi' the gun, Sharkie, and I'll dae me best tae haud 'em off a while."

For a long moment Mr. Nye studied the oncoming brig, chewing placidly at his quid of tobacco, finally he nodded, albeit unwillingly, whereupon eager hands hasted to uncover, load and haul the gun aft; and there, grovelling upon his knees, spattering blood all round him, Sir Hector trained and sighted the long, deadly piece.

"A smoothish sea, Sharkie!" he muttered. "'Tis a fair shot . . . if my hand has no' lost its cunning . . . so and so . . . a thocht mair eleevation!"

"And now, when you'm ready, sir," said Mr. Nye, blowing upon the fuse he had lighted, "if you'll stand away I'll give fire —"

"You!" exclaimed Sir Hector fiercely. "You, Sharkie? Man, d'ye ken I'm Hector Lauchlan MacLean o' Duart? Gi'e's the match afore I heave ye tae the fushes!" So saying, he snatched the fuse, blew on it, glanced along the piece and gave fire. Smoke, flame, a roar that seemed to shake the *True Believer* from stem to stern and then, as the smoke cleared, every man aboard cheered lustily and long as the brig's fore-topmast was seen to sway, totter and plunge over to leeward in flapping ruin.

"O John!" exclaimed Sir Hector, staggering to the rail. "O Johnnie, am I no' . . . juist a . . . bonny gunner!" And then Sir John, with Sharkie Nye, ran to catch him as he fell.

They carried him below, and there, having bared the gash in mighty forearm, they set about such rough sur-

gery as they might; but to them, swift-footed and authoritative, came one who took over the ugly business — one with hands far quicker and more capable than their own, and who, finding all things to her purpose, bade them begone.

Reaching the deck, they saw the *Seahorse* brig, hampered by her wrecked topmast, had brought to; and though her guns still flashed and roared, their shot did no more harm, for the *True Believer*, her damage repaired, was foaming upon her way once more.

"Ecod, sir," murmured Mr. Nye, rubbing at bristly chin, "but for that shot . . . 't was touch an' go wi' us for a minute, d' ye see! That shot . . . was . . . a shot! Aye, a shot as 'll be 'eer'd and talked on all along the coast . . . 't is for us *True Believers* — all on us — to keep tight mouths or some on us may swing. That young 'ooman now . . . I be a cautious man by natur', sir, so what o' the young 'ooman? Females talk, d' ye see!"

"I can promise you that she will not," answered Sir John, stretching wearied limbs in the grateful sunshine. "You need be under no apprehension on her account."

"And to be sure she 've a proper masterful, damn-your-eyes way wi' her, drown'd me if she ain't!"

"Very true, Mr. Nye, you may ha' noticed she has a chin!"

"Aye, aye, sir . . . but so 'ave I."

"Very bristly — like mine own, Mr. Nye, while hers is dimpled yet determined."

"And her carries it like any grand lady!"

"Exactly what I have thought, Mr. Nye!"

"Though I don't set much store by fe-males, sir, being a bachelor, very determinated, d' ye see!"

"My own case precisely!" murmured Sir John. Then, with one accord, they turned to glance back at the *Seahorse* brig, now fast disappearing in the haze of a hot, midsummer morning.

## CHAPTER XI

### Of an Altruistic Scot

Despite her wounds, the *True Believer* made a fair crossing, and the day was still young when Sir John, stumbling up from the dark and noisome hole Mr. Nye called his "state-room," drank deep of the sweet morning air and hasted to the rail, there to lean and gaze ecstatic upon the Sussex shore. A coast of fair, green slopes, of snowy cliffs, just now all pink and gold in the early sunshine, with, above and beyond, the blue swell of the Downs. A coast that has known much of storm and battle since Roman armour flashed beneath the resistless eagles, and William the Norman landed on Pevensey Level to march his eager mercenaries against the war-worn ranks of Saxon Harold.

And yet it is a gentle coast of white and green and purple distances, its every rock and headland seeming to beckon the weary, home-returning traveller, speaking to him of remembered hamlets nestling amid the green; of familiar roads, tree-shaded, a-wind between flowery banks and hedgerows; of quiet villages and sleepy, ancient towns backed by the swelling grandeur of the silent, mysterious Downs.

The peep of clustered homesteads drowsing in sheltered cove, the majesty of towering white cliffs soaring from boulder-strewn, foam-washed foreshore; the wide beaches backed by the grey spires and towers of some town — these are "home," and their mere sight like the welcoming grip of some friendly hand.

Thus stood Sir John, scanning remembered hamlet and village glad-eyed: Shoreham and Brighthelmstone, Rottingdean, Newhaven and Seaford, the snowy cliffs of Cuckmere Bay, with the dim shape of mighty Beachy Head afar.

So lost was he in memories conjured up of these well-remembered, boyish haunts that he started to feel a hand upon his shoulder, and turned to find Sir Hector beside him; he bore neatly bandaged arm in a sling beneath his coat and was smoking the short, clay pipe he affected.

"How are you now, Hector?"

"Gey an' bonny, thanks tae yon Rose. Faith, John, she's by ordinar', I'm thinkin'!"

"My own idea exactly, Hector—"

"An' the hand o' her, John!"

"Ah, so you have noticed them also, Hector? So white and shapely . . . and pretty—"

"Pretty? Hoot awa', 't is their gentleness, their quickness—"

"Such slender fingers, Hector, such pink palms—"

"Umph-humph!" snorted Sir Hector, and turned to stare landwards. "A fair prospect, John lad!" quoth he suddenly in his precise English. "'T is better than your perfumed salons in Paris, or the gilded pomp and pageantry of Versailles. Aye, a sweet and homely prospect—though, mind ye, 't is no' tae be compared wi' Scotland, whateffer."

"Why did you leave Scotland, Hector? And how come you, of all men, to be friends with Mr. Nye and his fellow-smugglers?"

"Egad, 't is a long story, John! But, briefly, you must know that chancing to have the better o' my good cousin Lauchlan—'the MacLean'—(o'er a point o' strategy, if I mind rightly), I left the MacLean country and the hame o' my forefaythers, though my heart was sair waefu', John, an' became a roofless wight—a hameless wanderer!"

"And all by reason of a quarrel with your cousin, Hector."

"Aye, juist that! Ye see, Johnnie, it so happened the man was like tae dee!"

"To die, Hector? How so?"

"Why, the puir gentleman misjudged his distance,

and my Andrew here took him a ding i' the wame, Johnnie."

"Aha, a duel, was it? When was this, Hector?"

"Twa-three years aboot, lad. So, bein' a lone man and weary wi' my wandering, y' ken, I minded you, Johnnie, an' cam' Sussex-wards a-seekin' ye. But, learnin' ye were leevin' in Parus an' much too fine a gentleman for Sussex, I bought me a wee bit hoosie ower Alfriston way — an' there I 'm leevin' yet, God be thankit."

"Why, then, Hector, since I intend living at High Dering henceforth, you must live there too. You shall have your old rooms in the north wing . . . your study, Hector, with so few books and so very many weapons . . . 't was there you gave me my first lesson in fencing. Do you remember?"

"Aye, I do, lad. And you were ower fond o' the 'point' even then, John. But as for comin' back yonder to live — whisht, laddie! Alfriston suits me fine, an' ma bit hoosie is nane sae bad for a lonely man, y' ken!"

"Tush!" exclaimed Sir John, a trifle pettishly. "High Dering won't seem home without you. And if you are so lonely —"

"Why, I 'm no' juist solitary, John lad. I hae my company for a crack now an' then and to smoke a pipe wi' of an evening; there 's Geordie Potter an' Peter Bunkle, an' Joe Pursglove an' Joe Muddle, an' ane or two mair. So y' see I 'm no' juist solitary."

"But you live alone, I suppose?"

"Aye, I dae that — leastways, there 's Wully Tamson sleeps i' my kitchen on account o' his wife when he 's fu' — which is frequent. . . . But, Johnnie," here Sir Hector paused to stare very hard at his short clay pipe, "I 've lately had an idea — very lately! I 've juist the noo come tae a fixed determination. . . . 'T is like enough I shall be a lonely man nae longer, y' ken."

"'S death, Hector man, you never think of marrying?"

"Marryin' — me? Losh, man, dae I look like it? Dinna be sic a fule! I 'm fair amazed at ye! No,

John," continued Sir Hector, his English suddenly precise, "I have, upon due consideration, determined to adopt the girl Rose — "

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir John, with sudden laugh, but meeting Sir Hector's glare of angered amazement, contrived to regain his gravity. "So you have determined to . . . to adopt my Rose child, have you, Hector?"

"I hae that!"

"Have you put the matter to her?"

"I hae so!"

"And what said she?"

"The puir, preety soul fair turned her back an' weepit, John."

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir John again. "Hum! Wept, did she, Hector?"

"She did that!"

"And you saw her tears down-distilling all crystalline woe, Hector?"

"She had her back tae me, I'm tellin' ye!"

"Well, did she embrace your offer in humble, grateful thankfulness?"

"She's tae gi'e me her answer when she's conseedered the matter."

"So, Hector, you offer her the comfort and shelter of a home, the secure protection of your care . . . merely because she tended the hurt in your arm?"

Sir Hector seemed to find some difficulty with the drawing of his pipe; he examined it, tapped it, grew red in the face blowing down it, and finally, giving it up in despair, spoke.

"John, ye've a shrewd eye for a bonny lass. I'll no' deny she's an unco' handsome creature. But wha's better, lad, she's a gude lass, sweet an' pure, John . . . and here's mysel', an auld sojer as kens little o' women except — t' other sort; here's me, John, wad keep her gude and pure as she is. Gin she'll but trust tae my care, here's me will shield her from onything and onybody, aye, even from — from — "

"Me, Hector?"

"Aye — juist yersel', John."

"Ha!" sighed Sir John, and turned to stare at the shore again, its sandy bays and snowy cliffs much nearer now, while Sir Hector, eyeing him a little askance, began to worry at his pipe again. And then she who was the subject of their talk stepped out upon deck and stood gazing shorewards beneath her hand.

"You are quite sure, then, that I mean her evil?" inquired Sir John softly, his glance upon her unconscious form.

"Why, Jock . . . why, Jock lad, . . . ye see . . . there's y'r reputation!"

"My reputation!" he repeated. "Ever and always my reputation. Aye, to be sure, Hector, to be sure — my reputation dogs me and will do all my days. . . . I am no fit companion for Innocence; my reputation forbids. . . . It goes beside me like a shadow, and yet for the moment I had forgot it. Rose!" he called suddenly. "Rose child, pray come hither!" Mutely obedient she came and stood, glancing quick-eyed from one to the other. "Rose," he continued, "my old and most honoured friend, Sir Hector MacLean, tells me he hath offered you the shelter of a father's care?"

"Yes, your honour."

"I have known and loved Sir Hector from my earliest years, and tell you that in him you would find the most honourable, kindest, most generous friend and guardian in all this big world — "

"Hoot, John lad!" exclaimed Sir Hector. "Ha' done, ye fair mak' me blush!" And away he strode, incontinent.

"Knowing you as I do, child," continued Sir John, his keen gaze upon her down-bent face, "I fear that Sir Hector's so altruistic offer may seem to you a matter for laughter — "

"Laughter?" she repeated in hot anger. "Oh, indeed, sir! Be this another o' your honour's clever guesses?"

"And so, Rose," he went on placidly, "if you must laugh indeed, laugh behind his back; do not let him see, for 't would wound him deeply —"

"And d' ye think I don't know it!" she exclaimed furiously. "Do you think I don't see in him all that is lacking in yourself, Sir John Dering? Simplicity, unselfishness, a noble innocence — the child in the man, thinking no evil. And think you I shall laugh at such? Oh, by heaven, I scorn you for so thinking —"

"And by heaven, child, you swear as trippingly as any fine lady —"

"Indeed, sir, my mistress is a pretty swearer, I've heard say!"

"Howbeit, Rose, when you shall refuse Sir Hector's generous and most ridiculous offer, as you surely will —"

"Oh, shall I, sir?"

"Beyond doubt!"

"You are sure, sir?"

"Positive!"

"And pray why is your honour so very certain?"

"Because you could never mother an old man in a cottage — or any other man, for that matter. The Spirit of Motherliness which is the true glory of woman is not within you, Rose, or . . . perchance it sleepeth. Who can imagine you bringing a man his slippers, lighting his pipe, scheming out and cooking some dish for the joy of seeing him eat, making his comfort your happiness? Not I! For these are but everyday, small duties — very humble things in themselves which yet, in the sum, make up that divine Spirit of Motherhood, that self-sacrificing, patient, unwearying, humble service that lifteth woman very nigh the angels."

"Faith, sir," she exclaimed contemptuously, "you talk finer than any parson and sound more sanctimonious than any good book that ever sent me to sleep! And remembering your honour's reputation, what d' you know of angels, pray?"

"Naught i' the world, child! Yet even I have my dreams. Now as to yourself—"

"Oh, I 'm all body an' no soul!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"You have a fine, shapely body, girl—"

"Oh, your honour flatters me!"

"But your soul, Rose, your soul is—let us say asleep, and its place usurped by a wild spirit a-tiptoe for adventure, heedless of restraint, passionate, unreasoning and apt to plunge you into all manner o' follies and dangers—"

"And doth all this go to prove I shall refuse Sir Hector's kind offer?"

"And when you do, child, let your refusal be gentle, put on for him your tenderest air, act for him your sweetest, most innocent self—"

"Oh, thank 'ee kindly, Sir John Dering, your honour!" she broke out fiercely. "But when I give him my answer I shall speak, and act, and think, and look exactly how I please!"

He was regarding my lady's retreating back somewhat wistfully when Sir Hector joined him.

"What hae ye done t' offend th' lassie, John?" he demanded.

"I have been making up her mind to accept your offer, Hector."

"Eh—eh? You have, ye say, John—you?"

"Myself, Hector! And yet, have I done right to influence the child, I wonder? Are you sufficiently old and reverend with years to become the guardian of a young and handsome girl?"

"Old enough!" exclaimed Sir Hector indignantly. "Losh, man, am I no' a person full o' years . . . aye, and an elder o' the kirk, forbye? Am I no' a puir auld sojer-man wi' ane fut i' the grave? Am I no'?"

"Faith and indeed, Hector, you are the youngest old man in Christendom."

"John, juist what are ye suggestin'?"

"Well, among other things, that you be duly pre-

pared to eat more than is good for you, to have your slippers brought to you o' nights, your pipe lighted, and, in fine, to be mothered morning, noon and night."

"Whisht, Johnnie man, ye're talkin' wild-like, I'm thinkin', and—"

"Axing y'r pardons, honours both," said Captain Sharkie Nye, stepping forward at this juncture to knuckle a bristly eyebrow at each in turn and jerk a thumb shorewards, "but yonder lays Noohaven, an' the Anchor be a fair, good inn. Y' see, sirs, George Potter ain't signalled us, which do mean as us must stand off an' on till it be dark. So if it be arl the same to ye, sirs, we'll set ye ashore so soon as you be ready."

Sir Hector assenting forthwith, the boat was got alongside, and they prepared to descend.

"Lord love us, Sir 'Ector, your honour!" exclaimed Captain Nye as they shook hands, "'t was a woundy good shot o' yourn, a shot as will be minded an' talked on fur many a day, aye—long arter we be dry bones, I reckon. 'T is n't often a King's ship be 'andled so rough, an' 't is for arl on us to keep tight mouths, I reckon. I'll be into Afriston one o' these nights in the dark o' the moon to smoke a pipe wi' your honour, 'cording to custom."

And so, having got into the pitching boat with no small difficulty, they were rowed ashore (discreetly outside the harbour), and were soon tramping up the slope of pebbly beach, beyond which lay the town. Presently they paused, as by mutual consent, and glanced back to see the boat hauled aboard the lugger, whose sails were smartly trimmed, and away foamed the *True Believer* seawards, with Captain Sharkie Nye waving his red cap to them from her rail.

"And now," sighed Sir John, "as regards that promised herring—"

"Herring!" snorted Sir Hector. "My puir lass—are ye no' hungry—famishing?"

"Too hungry to tell, sir!" she answered.

"After all, Hector," quoth Sir John, "though undoubtedly nourishing, perhaps a herring is not—"

"Tae the de'il wi' y'r herrin', man! Tam Levitt at the Anchor yonder hath aye a ham tae cut at, wi' a prime roast o' beef . . . by Andrew, the thocht nigh unmans me! Gi'e 's y'r hand, Rose, an' let 's rin for 't!" And off they raced forthwith, until my lady checked and bade Sir Hector "remember his poor arm!"

"And your hoary age, Hector!" added Sir John.

## CHAPTER XII

### Describeth the Duplicity of Innocence

Mr. Thomas Levitt, the landlord, received them beaming hearty welcome, and with many nods and winks anent "true-believers" one and all; and himself conducted them upstairs where, after sundry ablutions, they sat down to viands that amply justified Sir Hector's prophecy. And a very excellent, though somewhat silent, meal they made of it; even when hunger was appeased they spoke little — Sir Hector because he was comfortably drowsy, my lady because she was far too busy scheming out her next course of procedure, and Sir John because he was content to study her half-averted face as she sat, staring out of the open lattice. Thus he noted how her gaze turned suddenly from the sunny landscape without to her cloak, where it hung across an adjacent chair-back, and thence once more to the window, almost furtively, while her foot began to tap with restless impatience.

At last, Sir Hector chancing to snore gently, my lady started, glanced swiftly from the sleeper to Sir John and, meeting his whimsical glance, flushed suddenly and grew immediately angry in consequence.

"Well, sir," she demanded, frowning.

"I rejoice to know it, my Rose, for I —"

"I am not 'your' Rose!" she retorted petulantly, whereat he smiled gently. Quoth he:

"Nay, Rose, who knows what the future may disclose? Shy Rose, sly Rose, though thou seek'st to fly, Rose —"

"To fly?" she repeated, with startled look. "What — what do you mean?"

"Know, Rose, O Rose, love doth with thee go, Rose."

"Love, Sir John?" she questioned mockingly. "Indeed, and whose? And whither doth it go, pray?"

"Here and there, everywhere, this I vow to thee and swear — 'For though thou flee, Rose, learn of me, Rose — what is to be will surely be, Rose — '"

"Oh, ha' done with your silly rhymes!" she cried in angry impatience.

"O Petulance!" he sighed reproachfully. "Why must you interrupt the prophetic muse?"

"Prophetic?" she exclaimed scornfully. "Is this another o' your marvellous guesses?"

"Even so, Rose. And here's yet another! Regarding Sir Hector, his offer, 'to be or not to be' — your mind is made up. Here, then, steal I away, leaving you to wake and tell him aye or no." Saying which, Sir John arose, tiptoed from the chamber with elaborate care and closed the door softly behind him before she could find a suitable retort.

It was perhaps some half-hour later that Sir Hector found him busied inditing a letter; and Sir Hector's wig was very much askew and his eyes heavy with sleep.

"Whaur is she, John?" he inquired, staring about the room. "Whaur's the lassie Rose?"

"'Faith," answered Sir John, glancing up from his writing, "she should be safe enough. I left her with you."

"An' me asleep! I waked but the noo an' ne'er a sign o' her. Whaur is she, John?"

"I don't know."

"Man, I've sought all o'er the inn, aye, an' the stables too an' never a glimpse o' her — "

"Strange!" mused Sir John, brushing chin with the feather of his pen. "Odd . . . and yet quite comprehensible — "

"Ha, d'ye think so? Well, I ask ye whaur's the lass?"

"And I answer that I do not know."

"John, is it the truth ye're tellin' me?" Sir John laid down his pen and stared. "Well, can ye no' speak? Whaur is she? What hae ye done wi' her?"

"Hector," answered Sir John softly, "I am not in

the habit of lying, nor of permitting my word to be doubted by any man — "

"Aye, but I'm no' juist 'ony man' — I'm Hector Lauchlan MacLean o' Duart! Aye, an' I mind o'er weel y'r damnable reputation!"

"My reputation again — aye, to be sure!" murmured Sir John. "My reputation discredits me still, it seems — even with you!"

"An' why for no'? I've seen much o' life — plenty evil an' little good! I've kenned men honourably born like ye'sel' as hae lied — aye, tae their best frien', an' a' tae come at a wumman!"

"And you believe that I am lying?"

"Aye, I dae that!" cried Sir Hector in sudden fury, clapping hand to sword.

Sir John rose.

"So you — you give me the lie?" he demanded, grim-lipped.

"In y'r teeth, sir — in y'r teeth!" cried Sir Hector. "I believe that ye've stolen the puir innocent lass awa' for y'r ain base purposes!" And now, despite wounded arm, out flashed his ponderous blade, and with point advanced he stepped forward fierce and threatening; and so steel met steel. Then Sir John let fall his sword.

"My father's friend and comrade . . . God forbid!" quoth he. "Sir Hector, if you judge me rogue so vile — strike, man, and have done!" For a long moment Sir Hector stood irresolute, his great sword quivering in fierce-griping hand.

"Ye winna fecht?" he questioned hoarsely at last.

"Never with you, Hector."

"An' ye tell me ye've no' hidden the lassie?"

"I have not!"

"An' that you've no' driven her awa' wi' y'r shameful offers?"

"Most certainly not!"

"An' ye've had naething whateffer tae dae wi' her disappearance?"

"Nothing!"

"Then — the guid God forgi'e ye — read that, an' ken ye'sel' for the false leear y' are!" So saying, Sir Hector slapped down an open letter on the table, which, after a momentary hesitation, Sir John took up; and read as follows:

"*To the nobel and generous Sir Hector.*

HONORED SUR, — The memry of your extream and unselfish kindnes will remane ever sweet to pore me that must leve you awhile, perchance to return. If not arsk Sir John Dering the reason he may gess being so clever and perchance explane all things wherefore and why, Sir, I am your honor's grateful

ROSE.

Are all wicked men so clever as wicked Sir John Dering I wonder."

"An' now will ye fecht?" cried Sir Hector.

"No!" answered Sir John, flicking the letter to the floor. "Never with you, Hector!"

"Why, then — I'm done wi' ye!" roared Sir Hector, and, turning his back, stamped from the room, closing the door after him with a reverberating bang.

Left alone, Sir John reached for his sword, sheathed it, and, picking up the letter, read it through a second time; and conning it over thus he frowned a little, and his chin seemed a trifle more prominent than usual. He was standing lost in thought when, hearing a clatter of hoofs in the yard, he glanced through the window to behold Sir Hector mount and ride away, his weatherbeaten hat cocked at a ferocious angle. Slowly and carefully Sir John folded up the letter and thrust it into a leathern wallet to keep company with a curl of black and glossy hair. Then he rang and ordered a horse in his turn.

"Pray, Mr. Levitt," he inquired, "how many posting-inns are there in this town?"

"Only two, sir; there be the Lion an' there be the Wheatsheaf, both i' the High Street, your honour."

So in due season, the saddle-horse being at the door,

Sir John mounted, bade Mr. Levitt a cheery "good-bye" and rode along the High Street. Inquiring at the Lion, he learned of an ostler the information he sought, to wit: "That a young 'ooman — or lady — had ordered their fastest chaise an' druv' away for Lon'on 'bout a hour ago!" Sir John thanked his informant, bestowed on him a crown, and rode upon his way, smiling a little grimly.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Concerning the Advent of John Derwent

Sir John, who, it would seem, never did things by halves, had within the week transformed that exquisite work of art, known at Paris and Versailles as Sir John Dering, into a very ordinary-looking Mr. Derwent. In place of flowing peruke, embroidered coat and perfumed silks and laces, Mr. Derwent wore a small, unpowdered scratch-wig and a sober, snuff-coloured suit extremely unpretentious, and instead of gold-hilted small-sword, carried a serviceable holly-stick. Indeed, Mr. Derwent's whole appearance was so eminently unnoticeable and his bearing so ordinary that he might have been termed "insignificant," except perhaps for a certain tilt of his chin and the brilliance of his long-lashed eyes.

It was a hot, languorous afternoon; birds chirped drowsily, butterflies hovered, and Sir John, or rather Mr. Derwent, seated upon the lofty summit of Firle Beacon, breathed an air fresh from the sea yet fragrant of the wild thyme of the Downs, and hearkened to the larks that soared high above and all around him, filling that same air with their joyous, trilling music: insomuch that he grew joyous also, since this was England and home. Beneath him the majestic Beacon swept down to the wide vale below in great, billowing, green curves of sweet, springy turf where a myriad flowers bloomed; away to the south rose the mighty shape of Windover, and between, a far-stretching vale where homestead and hamlet nestled amid trees that bosomed time-worn tower and ancient spire, backed by shady copse, denser wood and the dark, far-flung forest of Battle; a fair and wide prospect where brooks sparkled, a winding river gleamed and white roads ran between shady hedgerows and flowery banks; a vast expanse where the unwearied gaze might

rove from distant Lewes away to Pevensey Level and a haze that was the sea.

So lost was Sir John in the ever-changing wonder of the scene that he started suddenly, beholding one who had approached unheard upon the velvet ling, a man who also surveyed the widespread landscape with eyes of awed delight. A man, this, of no great size yet of powerful build, a man in weather-stained coat, open-knee'd breeches and rough shoes and stockings, yet who wore these garments with an unconscious ease, while the face beneath shapeless hat was well-featured and arresting: indeed, there was about his whole person an air of breeding and refinement that Sir John was quick to heed; in one hand he bore a long-barrelled musket, in the other a newly slain rabbit, and upon his broad back a small colour-box.

"A glorious prospect, sir!" quoth Sir John.

"Indeed!" nodded the stranger, his gaze still upon the distance. "'T is a sight to fill a man with wonder, a country to leave that a man may come back to it, to paint because it is so unpaintable . . . so simple that it awes a man with its mystery . . . a country to live in and die in . . . 't is the Down-country, sir!"

"You know it well, I perceive, sir."

"Aye," answered the stranger, seating himself upon the grass. "I know every ring, barrow and tumulus far as you can see — and farther. I have fished every bend o' yon river and have painted it all so often that I begin to know that I never shall paint it . . . no hand ever will! Though, to be sure, I have come nigh doing so once or twice! But what brush can suggest all the sublime majesty of these everlasting hills, yon sweep of valley? So when I 'm tempted to try again, I generally bring Brown Bess here that my day be not wholly in vain." And he patted the long weapon across his knees.

"Do you always shoot conies with a musket, sir?"

"Always!" nodded the painter, with sudden smile, "'T is a little irregular, mayhap, but 't is more sport

to myself and fairer to the coney. If I miss, which is seldom, my coney is unharmed; when I hit, which I generally do, my coney is swiftly and very completely dead . . . you are a stranger hereabouts, I think, sir?"

"Extremely!" answered Sir John.

"Aye, to be sure," nodded the painter, smiling grimly. "Folk in these parts don't take kindly to new faces —"

"Being all staunch believers in — free trade . . . 'True-believers'?" suggested Sir John.

"Aha, you've heard o' that elusive craft, then?" inquired the painter, with a keen glance.

"And sailed aboard her a week ago!" nodded Sir John.

"What — the trip they crippled the *Seahorse?* Were this known 't would make you at home wi' all the Down folk hereabouts. For, egad, sir, we're all smugglers, more or less, and are, on the whole, a very orderly, peaceable community — with the exception of that damned scoundrel, my Lord Sayle, whose life is a scandal in every way."

"I've heard of him, sir; he is said to be a dangerous fellow — an inveterate duellist?" said Sir John.

"Aye, as notorious as Dering of Dering, whose empty house stands in the valley yonder. 'T would be a blessing to the world in general if these two fine gentlemen could meet and exterminate each other; they have cumbered the earth too long — especially my Lord Sayle, one o' your merciless rake-hells . . . a very masterful libertine of whom I've heard such shameful tales — faugh!" and the painter spat in sheer disgust.

"And is my lord a smuggler also?"

"Why, at first he winked at 'the trade' and took many a bale and cask as a bribe, but later he demanded a percentage on every cargo, and, being refused, promptly ratted and set the law in motion, with the result that there's been wild doings hereabouts o' late and may be wilder yet. The excise officers will find theirs a hard task for, as I say, we're all 'in it' more or less. I've drank many a glass of right Nantzy, and even Parson Hartop, godly soul, has smoked tobacco that hath paid

no more duty than the laces on my daughter's petticoat. Are ye travelling far, sir?"

"To High Dering."

"Ah, 't is a village over yonder!" said the painter, with a jerk of his head. "'T is a village, sir, that labours under a blight, a disease, a very effective curse."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sir John, a little startled.

"Yes, sir. The name of this particular disease is Dering — Sir John Dering."

"Ah," sighed Sir John, "I have heard of him also —"

"And little to his good, I 'll warrant!" quoth the painter. "Dering of Dering is the biggest landlord in these parts — and the worst."

"How so, sir?"

"Owning so much land, he consequently owes a duty to the country and to his tenants — a debt he hath never paid and never will, being a poor fool, sir, a miserable wretch who takes and gives nothing, who passes his life in riot and debauchery shut up in Paris salons when he might be walking these hills a free man, honoured by his tenantry. . . . Are you staying long hereabouts?"

"Yes, sir," answered Sir John. "And my name is Derwent."

"Then, Mr. Derwent, should you find yourself Alfriston way, come and see us. My daughter shall brew you a dish of such tea as you seldom drank before and that never passed the excise . . . and I 've some French brandy — ! We will smoke a friendly pipe and talk, sir, for to talk is to be alive!" So saying, the painter got lightly to his feet and stood a moment to survey the widespread prospect.

"Look around you!" quoth he. "In the brooding silence of these immemorial hills the long-forgotten dead may find voices to speak of vanished peoples whiles here we stand, you and I, alive for a little space, yet soon to pass and vanish, as they. How glorious, then, whiles we have life, to worship the Infinite God within and around us, here amid these fragrant solitudes . . . and to poach an

occasional rabbit!" saying which, the painter laughed, shouldered his musket and strode off, leaving Sir John to pursue his solitary and pensive way, filled with a strange new sense of responsibility, until, having descended the Beacon, he reached a stile and, seated thereon, fell to profound meditation.

Across undulating park, shaded by ancient trees, rose the stately pile of Dering Manor, his home; in the valley hard by, sheltered beneath lofty Firle, nestled Dering village; all around him, far as eye could see, the land was his: thus, as he surveyed this goodly heritage, his sense of responsibility grew, a feeling unknown until now.

From these reflections he was suddenly aroused by feeling a sharp prod in the back, and, glancing sharply around, beheld an old man who peered up at him from under a well-brushed, wide-eaved hat and poked at him with a knotted stick; a small, wrinkled, rosy-cheeked, exquisitely neat old man in spotless frock and highly polished boots, and who now addressed him in querulous tones, though his bright eyes held a lurking twinkle.

"Lord, young master, lordy-lord!" he quavered; "there 'ee du set s' quiet an' still as Peter Bunkle's 'og as was killed day afore yesterday 's ever was, that 'ee du!"

"I was thinking," answered Sir John, almost apologetically.

"Well, I be thinkin' tu . . . I be thinkin' 't is toime 'ee comed off'n stile an' mak' way fur a old, ancient man as wur a-buryin' folk older 'n 'ee afore 'ee was born, I reckon."

Down got Sir John forthwith and, seeing the old man so feeble, reached out a hand in aid, whereupon the ancient man swore at him, though a little breathlessly by reason of his exertions as he climbed.

"Dang 'ee — lemme be!" he gasped. "Du 'ee think as oi caan't cloimb a little bit of a stoile as I've clumb, man an' bye, for seventy year? Lemme be — an' dang 'ee twoice!" Gasping these words and with infinite exertions the old man mounted the stile, seated himself on the top bar in Sir John's place and, mopping wrinkled brow with

the end of a newly washed and ironed neckerchief of vivid hue, nodded at Sir John in very fierce and determined fashion. "Look 'ee naow," he panted. "I 've set 'ere on this yer stoile fur six-and-sixty year — ah, p'r'aps longer — every sunny arternoon, off an' on, and 'ere I be agoin' to set 'cording to custom, so oi be — an' dang you an' arl! An' what do 'ee say naow?"

"That you are very welcome," smiled Sir John. "I hope you live to sit there for many a long day; you look hale and hearty — "

"Wot — me?" croaked the old man fiercely. "Me 'ale an' 'earty! Lordy-lord, young man, 'ee must be a gert fule not t' see as oi du be waastin' away an' perishin' wi' a disease no doctor nor 'poth'cary can cure. There be 'poth'cary Mayfield, over tu Lewes, sez tu me: 'Osea Dumbrell,' 'e sez, 'if I wuz tu give 'ee arl th' drugs in my shop they would n't do 'ee no manner o' good!' 'e sez. An' no wonder, for my disease bean't no ordinary disease — no! My disease, young man, be a musket-ball in my in'ards as won't come out no-'ow!"

"A musket-ball!" exclaimed Sir John, staring.

"Ah — in me in'ards!" nodded the old man triumphantly; "as won't come out! An' twixt you an' me, a preventive bullet it were. Ketched me 'ere 'twixt wind an' watter, it did! Six-an'-fifty years ago come Martinmas, an' brings up agin me backbone wi' a crack as nigh deafened me; ah, it be gert wonder as it did n't kill oi stone-dead!"

"Indeed, yes!" murmured Sir John.

"An' theer it du bide ever since, young man. I can feel it! Whens'ever oi walk tu fast or coughs a spell, that theer old musket-ball goes a-rollin' an' a-rattlin' about in me pore old in'ards summat crool, lordy-lord! Las' toime I seed Doctor Blake, t' surgeon, about 'un, 'e shook 'is 'ead solemn-loike: 'You 'm a-goin' t' die, 'Osea Dumbrell,' 'e sez. 'Aye,' I sez, 'so be you, doctor, but as fur oi — when?' 'When ye du,' 'e sez, ''t will be mortal sudden!' 'e sez. That wur years an' years ago,

an' 'ere be I alive an' kickin'. . . . Doan't seem right some'ow, fur doctor be mortal knowin'. But I doan't look much loike dyin', du I?"

"No, indeed!" answered Sir John. "And you are surely the neatest, smartest —"

"That 'll du — that 'll du!" croaked the ancient man angrily. "'Tidn't my fault! Don't 'ee go a-blamin' of oi — blame me granddarter Ann! Her du be for ever a-washin' an' a-breshin' an' a-cleanin' o' me till it be gert wonder 'er don't scrub me into me grave! Combed all th' 'air off'n me 'ead, she 'ave, an' now combin' out arl me whiskers — what be left of 'em! 'Tidn't respectful — no! 'Ef 'ee du get dirty,' 'er sez tu me, 'no baccy!' 'er sez — a crool 'ard creeter be me granddarter Ann! Look at me boots, so bright an' shinin' — I dassent go a-nigh a bit o' mud! An' I loike mud — leastways a bit o' mud don't nowise 'arm nobody, an' when it be forbid I could waller in it, j'yful — ah, an' I will one o' these days an' dang arl! A crool, flinty-'earted, brimstone witch be my granddart —"

"Granfer!" called a soft voice at no great distance. "Granfer!"

"By goles!" ejaculated the ancient; and skipping down from the stile with surprising agility, he was in the act of brushing imaginary dust from his immaculate smock-frock when round a bend in the lane there appeared a shapely young woman who, coming thus unexpectedly upon Sir John, blushed very prettily and dropped him a curtsey, then turned to glance at one standing immediately behind her, a tall, square-shouldered, powerful-looking fellow who, meeting Sir John's quick, bright glance, flushed also, from square chin to the curls of very neat wig that showed beneath neat hat, and, flushing, bowed, though remarkably stiff in the back about it.

"Come, Granfer," said the girl, "it be toime ye took your egg-an'-milk!"

"Cruel and flinty-hearted?" murmured Sir John reproachfully. "O Mr. Dumbrell!"

"Hesh-hesh!" whispered the ancient fiercely.

"Are ye catchin' cold, Granfer deary?"

"Brimstone witch? O Mr. Dumbrell!"

"Who be the man ahint ye, Nan?" demanded the old man, pointing with his stick.

"Only the gentleman as took my part 's marnin' agin Mr. Sturton, Granfer."

"Sturton!" snarled the ancient, flourishing stick in tremulous hand. "Sturton — dang 'im! Ef I ketch 'im tryin' t' kiss 'ee, lass, I 'll break 'is 'ead for 'im so old as I be — aye, I will, an' 'e can turn us out o' th' ow'd cottage arter if 'e loikes — dang 'im! Doan't 'ee forget pore Mary Beal as drownded 'erself las' year arl along o' Sturton — "

"There, there, Granfer, you be gettin' arl of a shake! That 'll du now, that 'll du or — no puddin' fur your supper, mind that."

"Arl right, lass, arl right! Only when I du think o' that Sturton — "

"Then don't 'ee, Granfer, or not a scrinch o' sugar or nutmeg in y'r egg-an'-milk an' nary a spot o' rum. So be a good lad an' come 'long o' me!"

"Well, Robert," quoth Sir John, seating himself on the stile again so soon as they were alone, "my letter reached you in time, then?"

"And I 'm here in conse-quence, sir!"

"What is all this about Sturton?"

Ex-Corporal Robert shifted his right foot sightly, and raising stiff arm, coughed deprecatingly behind a discreet hand.

"Sir," he answered, "I regret to be obleeged to inform your honour that I opened hostilities this morning without your honour's orders, feeling myself obligated thereto by reason of a young fe-male — "

"I suggest 'maid,' Robert."

"Maid, your honour, which young female crying out — "

"Damsel, Robert."

"Damsel, your honour . . . crying out, sir, I observed said young fe—"

"Nymph, Robert."

"Yes, sir. I ob-served same a-struggling with Mr. Sturton. Whereupon, your honour, judging the sercumstances called for indi-vidual action, I opened hos-tilities forthwith."

"Did Mr. Sturton receive any—injuries, Robert?"

"Only super-facially, sir. His right ogle, your honour, otherwise he retreated in fairly good order, sir."

"Whiles you comforted the distressed damsel, Bob?"

"I did my endeavour, sir," answered the ex-corporal, imperturbable as ever.

"Extreme commendable in you, Robert, for hitherto you have not been precisely a 'squire o' dames.'"

"Heretofore, sir, I have preferred horses."

"And egad," sighed Sir John wistfully, "'t would almost seem you were the wiser, Bob! For though horses may balk they cannot talk, they may break your neck but they cannot break your heart . . . 'S life, Bob, 't is subject suggestive for a lampoon on the Sex! . . . 'The Jade Equine and Feminine,' or 'The Horse The Nobler Animal.' . . . It promiseth, Robert, it promiseth! . . . Hum! Though horses may balk, women will talk; break your necks, falsest sex. Though horses unseat ye they cannot ill-treat ye. What though they be glandered no fame ha' they slandered. Though horses go lame they never defame. Yes, it promiseth exceeding well!" and out came Sir John's memorandum. And after he had been thus busied for some minutes, Robert the Imperturbable spoke:

"Pray what are your honour's orders?"

"Orders?" repeated Sir John, glancing up a little vacantly. "Though they be spavined . . . spavined? 'T won't do—'t is a devilish awkward word—eh, Bob?"

"Yes, sir . . . and your orders?"

"Aye, to be sure," sighed Sir John, "you will pursue every inquiry and research in regard to Mr. James Sturton

. . . and inquire for me at the 'Dering Arms' about six o'clock this evening."

"As Mr. Derwent, your honour?"

"As Mr. Derwent. And, by the way, Bob . . . concerning the granddaughter of our ancient Mr. Dumbrell —her name is Ann, I think?"

"So I am give to understand, sir."

"She is a fine, handsome creature, Robert?"

"Yes, your honour."

"With a neat foot and a low, sweet voice."

"Yes, your honour."

"Some sage philosopher hath it, Bob, that 'a pretty foot is the one element of beauty that defieth Time,' but I, who pretend to some little discernment in such matters, incline to the belief that a low, soft-sweet voice may endure even longer."

"Indeed, your honour?"

"Remembering which . . . and Mr. Sturton's apparently unwelcome attentions, I think 'twere as well you should keep an eye on old Mr. Dumbrell's granddaughter, Robert."

"Very good, sir!" answered the ex-corporal, and with a movement that was something between bow and salute, he wheeled and strode away, leaving Sir John, perched upon the stile, hard at work upon his lampoon.

## CHAPTER XIV

### How the Man of Sentiment Sentimentalised in a Ditch

He was not to remain long undisturbed, it seemed, for presently upon the stilly air was the faint, regular tapping of a stick that drew gradually nearer, and glancing up he saw an old woman approaching, one who trudged sturdily with the aid of a formidable staff and bore a large wooden basket on her arm; a tall old creature with a great jut of nose and chin and fierce bright eyes that glittered beneath thick brows, whose jetty-black contrasted very strangely with her snow-white hair. But just now these fierce old eyes were dimmed with tears, and more than once she sniffed loud and dolorously; perceiving which and noting how she laboured with the heavy-laden basket, Sir John pocketed his tablets and rose. But, quite lost in her grief, the old creature paused to sob and sniff and wipe away her tears with a corner of her shawl, in the doing of which she let fall her basket, scattering its contents broadcast in the dust. At this calamity she wailed distressfully, and was in the act of bending her old joints to collect her property when she was aware of one who did this for her, a slender, very nimble young man, at sight of whom she forgot her troubles a while, watching him in mute surprise, yet quick to heed the white delicacy of these hands as they darted here and there, collecting the bundles of herbs and simples with the other more homely vegetables that lay so widely scattered. Thus Sir John, happening to glance up as he stooped for a large cabbage, met the fixed scrutiny of a pair of black eyes, so fierce and keenly direct beneath their jutting brows that he stared back, surprised and a little disconcerted.

"My good dame, why d' ye stare so?" he questioned.

"I dream, young sir! Your bright eyes do ha' set me a-dreamin' o' other days . . . better days . . . when the world was younger . . . an' kinder. Old I be an' tur'ble lonesome, but I ha' my dreams . . . 't is arl the years ha' left me. . . . But why must ye meddle wi' the likes o' me?" . . . she demanded in sudden ferocity. "Why don't 'ee cross y'r fingers or mak' 'the horns' agin me?"

"Why should I?" he inquired, wondering.

"Because they du say as I've the 'evil eye' an' can blight a man wi' a look as easy as I can a pig . . . or a cow."

"To be sure your eyes are very strange and bright," he answered gently, "and must have been very beautiful once, like yourself — when the world was younger."

"Beautiful," she repeated in changed tone; and her eyes grew less keen, the harsh lines of her fierce, old face softening wonderfully. "Beautiful?" said she again. "Aye, so I was, years agone . . . though there be few as would believe it o' me now an' fewer eyes sharp enough t' see. . . . An' you bean't fruttened o' me then, young man?"

"No, I am not frightened," answered Sir John.

"Why then," quoth she, "when you 'm done wi' that cabbage o' mine, there be an onion over yonder, agin the dik'!" Sir John deposited the cabbage, and having retrieved the errant onion, added this also to the well-laden basket.

"That is all, I think?" said he, glancing about.

"Aye!" she nodded. "An' it be plain t' know you be a stranger hereabouts. There bean't a man nor bye, aye, an' mortal few o' the women, would ha' stooped to du so much for poor old Penelope Haryott, I reckon."

"And pray why not?"

"Because they say I be a witch, an' they be arl main fruttened o' me, an' them as say they ain't, du hate me most. Aye, me! I've been thrattened wi' the fire afore now; an' only las' March, an' main cold it were, they was for a-duckin' o' me in the Cuckmere. . . . Ah, an' they 'd

ha' done it tu if Passon Hartop 'ad n't galloped over tu Alfriston an' fetched Sir Hector MacLean as knew me years ago, an' Jarge Potter as I 've dandled a babe on my knee. Sir Hector were main fierce again the crowd an' swore t' cut any man's throat as dared tetch me, an' Jarge Potter 'ad on his old frieze coat — so the crowd let me go . . . they ain't tried to harm me since. . . . But 't is very sure you be a stranger in these parts, young man."

"Indeed, yes!" sighed Sir John, once more oppressed by the sense of his responsibility and of the duties left undone.

"An' yet there be a look about 'ee, young man, as do whisper me you was barn here in Sussex an' not s' fur away, I reckon."

"Oh . . . begad!" he exclaimed, starting. "What should make you think so, pray?"

"Y'r hands, young sir, the high cock o' your chin, y'r pretty eyes . . . they do mind me of other eyes as looked into mine . . . long afore you was barn . . . when the world was happier. . . . Though 'e were bigger 'n you, young man . . . so tall an' noble-lookin'! Alack, 't was long ago an' the world be changed for the worse since then — 'specially High Dering! Aye, me! I 'll be a-goin', young sir, thankin' ye for your kindness to a solitary old woman."

"How far are you going?" he questioned.

"Only to the village yonder."

"This basket is much too heavy for you."

"Lud, young master, I do be stronger than I look!" she answered, with a mirthless laugh. "Aye, tur'ble strong I be or I should ha' died years agone, I reckon. So doan't 'ee trouble, sir . . . besides, folk 'ud stare t' see s' fine a young man along o' me, an' a-carryin' my old trug an' arl . . . so let be!"

Sir John smiled, took up the basket, reached his stick whence it leaned against the stile and set off with old Penelope Haryott, suiting his pace to hers and talking

with such blithe ease that old Penelope, forgetting her rustic pride at last, talked in her turn, as she might have done "when the world was younger and better."

"Ah yes, I mind Sir Hector years agone, when he were jest Mr. Hector an' friend t' Sir John Dering — him as was the 'real' Sir John as lived at 'the gert house' yonder an' married here . . . an' marched away t' the wars wi' Mr. Hector, both s' fine in their red coats, and him s' handsome an' gay . . . him as was killed an' never come marchin' back."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir John as she paused. "So you knew Sir John Dering, the Sir John who was killed years ago in Flanders? Pray tell me of him."

"An' why should I?" quoth the old woman in sudden anger. "He 's been dead long years an' forgot, I reckon. But when he lived the world was a better place . . . 'specially High Dering! Aye, he was . . . a man!"

"And what," questioned Sir John wistfully, "what of the new Sir John Dering?"

Old Penelope spat contemptuously and trudged on a little faster.

"Take care o' my old trug, young man," she admonished; "the 'andle be main loose! Aye, me, if my troubles was no 'eavier than that theer trug I 'd bear 'em j'yful!"

"Are you so greatly troubled, then?" he asked gently.

"Ah, more 'n my share, I reckon! And an old woman so solitary as I be, must allus go full o' sorrow!"

"Will you tell me some of your sorrows, old Penelope?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I ask reverently and respect you."

"Respect! Me?" she muttered. "Respect? O kind Lord, 't is a strange word in my old ears! Folks mostly curse me . . . the children throws stones at me! 'T is an ill thing to be named a witch . . . an' all because I can see deeper and further than most fules, can read the good an' evil in faces an' know a sight about yarbs an' simples. An' they 're fruttened o' me, the fules . . . ah, an' they need be, some on 'em — 'specially one!"

"You were weeping when I saw you first, Penelope; yet tears do not come easily with you, I judge."

"Tears?" she exclaimed fiercely. "An' yet I've shed s' many 't is gert wonder there be any left. 'T is wonnerful how much one woman can weep in one lifetime, I reckon."

"And why did you weep to-day?"

"'Tidn't no manner o' business o' yourn, young man!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"Why, then, pray forgive me!" he answered, with a little bow; at this she stared and immediately spoke in changed voice.

"I wep', sir, because this day week I 'm to be turned out o' doors wi' never a roof to shelter me — unless some o' the neighbours offers — which they won't . . . Lord, tak' care o' the trug, young man; if ye swing it so fierce 't will go to pieces!"

"Why are you being turned out?"

"Because they be arl fruttened o' me — an' him most of arl —"

"Whom do you mean by 'him'?"

But old Penelope tramped on unheeding, only she muttered to herself fiercely.

"Do you dread the future so greatly, Penelope?"

"No!" she answered sturdily. "I bean't fruttened o' now't but fire . . . an' dogs!"

"Dogs?" he questioned.

"Aye, young man, they du set 'em on me sometimes; 't is why I carry this gert staff . . . killed a dog wi' it once, I did — though I were badly bit! So they clapped me in the stocks, the dog was valleyble, y' see, an' chanced to belong to Lord Sayle, him as du live at the great 'ouse 'Friston way."

Talking thus, they became aware of leisured hoof-strokes behind them, and, turning to stare, old Penelope pointed suddenly at the approaching rider with her long staff.

"Yonder 'e comes!" she whispered fiercely; "him as

ought t' be dead an' gibbeted . . . him as be afeart o' me!"

Glancing round in turn, Sir John beheld a man bestriding a large, plump steed, a man who rode at a handpace, apparently lost in thought. Thus Sir John had full time to observe him narrowly as he approached.

He seemed a prosperous and highly respectable man for he went in broadcloth and fine linen; but his garments, devoid of all embellishings, were of sober hue so that, looked at from behind, he might have been an itinerant preacher with a hint of the Quaker, but seen from in front, the narrow eyes, predatory nose, vulpine mouth and fleshy chin stamped him as being like nothing in life but himself.

Slowly he approached, until, suddenly espying the old woman, he urged his somnolent horse to quicker gait and rode towards her, brandishing the stick he carried.

"Damned hag," cried he, "you ought to burn!"

"Dirty twoad," she retorted, "you 'd ought to hang!" At this, the man struck at her passionately, and, being out of reach, spurred his powerful horse as if to ride her down; but Sir John, setting by the basket, sprang and caught the bridle.

"Steady, sir, steady!" quoth he mildly.

"Mind your own business!" cried the horseman.

"Faith, sir," answered Sir John ruefully, "'t is high time I did, 't would seem. And indeed I propose doing so, but in my own fashion. And first I desire to learn why you ride the King's highway to the common danger —"

"Oh, and who the devil might you be?"

"One who hath played divers rôles, sir," answered Sir John. "Just at present I find myself a Man o' Sentiment, full o' loving-kindness, especially to sorrowful old age —"

"What the devil!" exclaimed the horseman, staring.

"Come then, sir, let us together bare our heads in homage to Age, Sorrow and Womanhood in the person of this much enduring Mistress Haryott!" and off came Sir John's hat forthwith.

"Are ye mad?" demanded the other scornfully. "Are ye mad or drunk, my lad?"

"Sir, a Man of Sentiment is never—"

"Curse your sentiment! Let me warn ye that yon hag is a notorious evil-liver and a damned witch—"

"Which as a Man of Sentiment—"

"Hold y'r tongue, d' ye hear! She 's a witch, I tell ye, so tak' my advice, my lad, throw that old trug o' her'n over the hedge and leave her to the devil! And now loose my bridle; I 'm done."

"But I am not, sir!" answered Sir John. "You attempted to strike a woman in my presence, and have dared allude to me twice as your 'lad'—two very heinous offences—"

"Loose my bridle or 't will be the worse for ye. D' ye know who I am?"

"Judging by your right eye, sir, its rainbow colouring, I opine you must be Mr. James Sturton—"

"Damn your insolence—leggo my bridle!"

But instead of complying, Sir John gave a sudden twist to the bit, whereupon the plump and somnolent steed waked to sudden action, insomuch that Mr. Sturton was nearly unseated and his hat tumbled off; whereupon Sir John deftly skewered it upon the end of his stick and tossed it over the hedge; and old Penelope, watching its brief flight, uttered a single screech of laughter and was immediately silent again.

Mr. Sturton, having quieted his horse, raised his stick and struck viciously, but Sir John, deftly parrying the blow, answered it with a thrust, a lightning riposte that took his aggressor full upon fleshy chin; Mr. Sturton dropped his stick, clapped hand to chin and, seeing his own blood, spurred madly upon Sir John, who, in escaping the lashing hoofs, tripped and fell forthwith into the ditch.

"Let that learn ye!" cried Mr. Sturton, exultantly shaking his fist. "A ditch is the proper place for you, my lad. . . . I only hope as you 've broke a bone."

"Thank you," answered Sir John, sitting up and groping for his hat, "I find myself very well, for:

> Though in posture unheroic
> You behold me still a stoic.
> And, further, here's a truth, sir, which is:
> There are places worse than ditches!

Indeed, Mr. Sturton," he added, leaning back in the ditch and folding his arms, "'t is in my mind that you may find yourself yearning passionately for a good, dry ditch one o' these days."

"Bah!" cried the other contemptuously. "If ye can crawl — crawl and bring me my hat."

"The heavens," answered Sir John, pointing thither with graceful flourish, "the heavens shall fall first, sir."

"Ha, now — look 'ee! You'll bring me my hat, young man, or I'll march you and yon vile old beldam into Dering and ha' ye clapped into the stocks together for assault on the highway! D' ye hear?"

"Sir," answered Sir John, "a fiddlestick!"

Uttering an angry exclamation Mr. Sturton whipped a pistol from his holster, but as he did so, old Penelope whirled her long staff which, missing him by a fraction, took effect upon his horse, whereupon this much-enduring animal promptly bolted and galloped furiously away with Mr. Sturton in a cloud of dust.

"Lord ha' mercy!" gasped old Penelope as the galloping hoof-beats blurred and died away. "Lord, what 'ave I done?"

"Removed an offence by a mere flourish o' your magic wand, like the fairy godmother you are!" answered Sir John. "Mistress Penelope, accept my thanks — I salute you!" And, standing up in the ditch, he bowed gravely.

"Ha' done, young man, ha' done!" she cried distressfully. "He 'll raise the village again' me . . . he 'll ha' me in the stocks again — an' arl along o' you! An' I can't bear they stocks like I used to . . . they cramps my old bones s' cruel. . . . O Lord ha' mercy! The

stocks!" And, leaning on her staff, she bowed her white head and sobbed miserably.

In a moment Sir John was out of the ditch and, standing beside her, laid one white hand upon her shoulder, patting it gently.

"Penelope," said he softly, "don't weep! No man shall do you violence. . . . I swear none shall harm you any more . . . so be comforted!"

"An' who be you t' promise s' much?" she demanded fiercely.

"One who will keep his word—"

"I be so old," she wailed—"so old an' lonesome an' weary of 't all."

"But very courageous!" he added gently. "And I think, Penelope, nay, I 'm sure there are better days coming for you—and me. So come, let us go on, confident in ourselves and the future."

And taking stick and basket in one hand, he slipped the other within his aged companion's arm and they tramped on again.

"You speak mighty bold, young man!" said she after a while, with another of her keen glances. "Aye, an' look mighty bold—why?"

"Perhaps because I feel mighty bold!" he answered lightly.

"Aye, like ye did when he knocked ye into the ditch, young man!"

"The ditch?" repeated Sir John. "Aye, begad, the ditch! 'S heart, it needed but this!" And here he laughed so blithely that old Penelope stared and, forgetting her recent tears, presently smiled.

"Ye tumbled so 'mazin' sudden, young man," she nodded. "An' then I never 'eerd no one talk po'try in a dik' afore."

"And you probably never will again, Penelope. The occasion was unique and my extempore rhymes none too bad."

"Eh—eh, young man, did ye mak' 'em up . . . a-settin' in t' dik' . . . arl out o' y'r head? Lord!"

So they reached the village at last, its deep-thatched cottages nestled beneath the sheltering down; a quiet, sleepy place where a brook gurgled pleasantly and rooks cawed lazily amid lofty, ancient trees; a place of peace, it seemed, very remote from the world.

But, as they went, rose a stir, a flutter, a growing bustle; heads peered from casements, from open doorways and dim interiors; children ceased their play to point, a woman laughed shrilly, men, homecoming from the fields, stood to stare, to laugh, to hoot and jeer; and foremost, among a group of loungers before the ancient inn, Sir John espied Mr. Sturton.

And thus amid hoots, jeers and derisive laughter came Sir John to High Dering.

## CHAPTER XV

### Which Introduces a Frieze Coat and its Wearer, One George Potter

"Old gammer du ha' found 'ersen a man at last!" cried a voice.

"Ah, the danged owd witch du ha' 'witched hersel' a sweet'eart fur sure!" roared another.

"An' sech a nice-lookin' young man an' arl!" quoth a matron with a fat baby in her arms, whom Sir John saluted with a bow, whereupon she hid blushing face behind her plump baby.

But as they progressed the crowd grew and, with increasing number, their attitude waxed more threatening; laughter changed to angry mutterings; clods and stones began to fly.

"I waarned 'ee 'ow 't would be!" quoth old Penelope bitterly. "You 'd best leave me an' run, young man, quick — up the twitten yonder!" Even as she spoke, Sir John was staggered by a well-aimed clod and his hat spun from his head. Setting down the basket he turned and stood fronting the crowd, frowning a little, chin uptilted, serene of eye. Foremost among their assailants was a burly young fellow, chiefly remarkable for a very wide mouth and narrow-set eyes, towards whom Sir John pointed with his holly-stick.

"Pray, Mistress Haryott," he inquired in his clear, ringing tones, "who is yonder ill-conditioned wight?"

"That?" cried old Penelope in fierce scorn. "It be Tom Simpson, a Lunnon lad . . . one o' th' Excise as creeps an' crawls an' spies on better men —"

"Oh, do I, then!" snarled the burly young man. "I 'll knock your dummed eye out for that, I will." And he reached for a stone, but checked suddenly as Sir John

strode towards him carrying the holly-stick much as if it had been a small-sword.

"Talking of eyes," quoth Sir John, with a graceful flourish of the stick, "drop that stone, lest I feel it necessary to blind you!" and he made an airy pass at the face of the young man, who leapt back so precipitately that he stumbled and fell, whereupon the crowd, roaring with laughter at his discomfiture, pressed nearer, eager for diversion.

"Doan't let 'un bloind 'ee, lad!" cried one.

"'E bean't so big as 'ee, Tom! Tak' a 'edge-stake tu un!"

"Noa, tak' my ol' bat; it du be a good 'eavy 'un, Tom!" cried a second.

The burly young man, finding himself thus the centre of observation, snatched the proffered stick, squared his shoulders and approached Sir John in very ferocious and determined manner, but halted, just out of reach, to spit upon his palm and take fresh hold upon his bludgeon; whereupon the crowd encouraged him on this wise:

"Knock 'is little wig off, Tom!"

"Poke 'is eye out, lad!"

"Aim at 'is nob!"

"Go fur 'is legs!"

Suddenly the burly young man sprang, aiming a terrific blow, but, instead of attempting a parry, Sir John leapt nimbly aside, and the young man, impelled by the force of his stroke, once more stumbled and fell; and then before he could rise, old Penelope commenced to belabour him with her long staff as he lay, panting out maledictions with every blow until the crowd, laughing, shouting, cursing, surged forward to the rescue. Drawing the fierce and breathless old creature behind him, Sir John, seeing escape impossible, faced the oncoming menace strung and quivering for desperate action, while the crowd lashed itself to fury by such cries as:

"Down wi' the young cock!"

"Scrag the owd witch, lads; to the watter wi' 'er!"

"Aye, to the river with 'em — both of 'em!" cried Mr. Sturton, loudest of all.

And then forth from one of those narrow lanes, or rather passages that are known as "twittens," sauntered a man in a short, frieze coat, vast of pocket and button, a wide-shouldered, comely man whose face, framed between neatly trimmed whiskers, wore an air of guileless good-nature. Guilelessness indeed! It was in his eyes despite their lurking twinkle, in the uptrend of his firm lips, the tilt of his nose, his close-cropped whiskers and square chin. Guilelessness beamed in the brass buttons of his short-skirted frieze coat, it was in the very creases of his garments, it seemed to enfold him from boots and gaiters to the crown of his weather-worn hat, it was in the tones of his soft yet resonant voice when he spoke:

"Lor' love Potter, Mr. Sturton, sir, but 'oo 's been an' give ye that theer tur'ble eye? Arl black it be, sir, leastways where it bean't black 't is green. An' swole, sir! Lor' love George Potter's limbs, it du be a-swellin' an' a-puffin' of itself up that proud, sir! 'T is most alarmin', Mr. Sturton! Shame on ye, neighbours; can't none on ye du nothin' fur poor Mr. Sturton's ogle — look at 'ee —" But, uttering a fierce imprecation, Mr. Sturton turned his back, pushed his way angrily into the inn, and slammed the door behind him.

"I never seen a blacker eye, never —"

"Don't go fur to blame we, Jarge Potter!" quoth a greybeard. "'Tidn't none o' our doin' — no!"

"Then what be the trouble, neighbours? What 's to du, good folk?" inquired Mr. Potter.

"It ain't none o' your business anyway!" retorted the burly young man sullenly. "We be honest folks, which be more than some can say with y'r poachin', ah, an' smugglin'!"

"Hold thy tongue, lad!" cried the greybeard, plucking the burly young man's arm. "Don't 'ee see as Jarge be wearin' 'is ol' frieze coat?"

"What do I care for 'is old coat!"

"That's because ye be fullish an' strange 'ereabouts an' doan't know Jarge."

"Neighbours," said Mr. Potter in his deep, leisured tones, his placid gaze roving from face to face, "you arl do know as Potter be a peaceable man, so here's Potter a-beggin' an' a-pleadin' o' ye to leave old Pen alone — or I'm afeard some on ye might get 'urted — bad, I reckon!" As he spoke, Mr. Potter's powerful hands disappeared into the deep pockets of his frieze coat, and he took a leisurely pace forward. "Simpson, my lad," quoth he, nodding kindly at the burly young man, "your mouth's so oncommon large as you'll swaller yourself, boots an' arl, one of these days, if ye open it s' wide! So run along, my lad! 'Ome be the word, neighbours; off wi' ye now — arl on ye. I bean't a-goin' t' plead twice wi' no one."

Mr. Potter's brow was smooth, guilelessness seemed to radiate and beam from his person, but, seeing how the crowd forthwith scattered and melted away, the burly young man betook himself off likewise, muttering darkly.

Then Mr. Potter turned in his unhurried fashion to look at Sir John, and the smile that lurked in the corners of his mouth slowly broadened.

"Young sir," said he, touching his hat, "who you be or what, bean't no consarn o' mine nohow, but, sir, you stood up for a old 'ooman as are n't got many to tak' 'er part, d' ye see, an' so 'ere's Potter a-thankin' of you — an' that is my business, I rackon."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter, 't would seem I have to thank you also, you — or your coat — "

"Coat?" repeated Mr. Potter, glancing down at the garment in question as if mildly surprised to behold it. "Aye, to be sure — 't is a old jacket as I use in my trade, d' ye see — "

"A free-trade, I think?" added Sir John.

"Lor' love 'ee, sir," sighed Mr. Potter, opening his guileless eyes a trifle wider, "doan't 'ee tak' no 'eed o' what that theer young Simpson says — "

"Mr. Potter," quoth Sir John, smiling, "a week ago

I was shaking hands with Captain Sharkie Nye aboard the *True Believer*, and I should like to shake yours."

"What, be you the young gen'leman as crossed wi' Sir Hector?"

"That same. And my name is Derwent."

"Why, Mr. Derwent, sir, that du alter the case, I rackon. So theer be Potter's 'and, sir, and heartily! Ah, an' yonder be old Penelope a-beckonin' . . . her will curse we shameful if us du keep her waitin' . . . so come 'long, sir."

"Aye, come y'r ways, du — both on ye!" cried the old creature imperiously. "'Tidn't often I 'as comp'ny, so I'll brew ye a dish o' tay — "

"Tea?" exclaimed Sir John.

"Aye, all the way from Chaney, young man! Tay as costes forty shillin' a pound an' more up to Lunnon — tak' care o' my old trug! This way — down twitten!"

She led them down a narrow way between the walls of cottages and gardens, and at last to a very small cottage indeed, a forlorn little structure, its garden trampled, its broken window-panes stuffed with old rags to exclude the elements, itself all dilapidation from rotting thatch to crumbling doorstep.

"And is this your home?" cried Sir John, very much aghast.

"It be, young man. They bruk' all my lattices months agone, an' Mr. Sturton won't put in no more. The chimbley smokes an' the thatch leaks an' I gets the ager bad, but it be my home an' I love every brick. For 't was here I was born, here I loved and lost, here I hoped to die, but Maaster Sturton be fur turning o' me out next month . . . bean't 'ee, Jarge?"

"'E be," answered Mr. Potter softly, "dang 'im!"

"Come in, young man, an' you tu, Jarge — come in; it du be better-lookin' inside than out." And indeed, once the door was shut, a particularly stout and ponderous door, Sir John noticed, the small, heavily beamed chamber was cosy and homelike, very orderly and clean, from the

polished copper kettle on the hob to the china ornaments upon the mantel.

And now Mr. Potter reached a hand within the mysteries of the frieze coat and drew thence a couple of plump rabbits.

"Found 'em s' marnin', Pen," he nodded. "An' here," he continued, groping deeper within vast pocket, "'ere be a — no, that be wire . . . 'ere — no, that be some baccy for 'Osea . . . ah, 'ere be a lump o' pork t' go wi' 'em, Pen."

"Thank 'ee kindly, Jarge! An' would 'ee moind a-skinnin' of 'em whiles I tidies myself up a bit?"

"Heartily, Pen."

"An' you, young man, poke up the fire an' put on the kittle t' bile . . . there be a pump in the yard."

Having performed these duties, Sir John, seating himself on a bucket beside the pump, watched Mr. Potter deftly operate upon the rabbits, and there ensued the following conversation:

MR. POTTER: Stayin' 'ereabouts, sir?

SIR JOHN: At the 'Dering Arms.'

MR. POTTER: Stayin' long, sir?

SIR JOHN: I hope so.

MR. POTTER: Why, so du I . . . seein' as you be known to Sharkie an' Sir 'Ector. And, besides, old Pen du ha' took to ye fair amazin' . . . an' she 's an eye like a nawk, 'as old Pen, aye, sharp as a gimblet it be. An' she 's took to ye, d' ye see, sir.

SIR JOHN: I feel truly and deeply honoured.

MR. POTTER: Well, you stood up for 'er s' arternoon agin them fules as meant mischief.

SIR JOHN: She seems to have suffered more than her share.

MR. POTTER: Suffered? Sir, Potter be a peaceable man an' bloodshed contrariwise to 'is natur' . . . no matter what you 'appen to hear . . . but there be some folk as I'd tak' a deal o' j'y to skin, d' ye see, like this

'ere! (Mr. Potter held up a newly skinned and pinkly nude rabbit.)

Sir John: Whom do you mean?

Mr. Potter: Ah! 'oo indeed, sir? Potter knows, but Potter's mum!

Sir John: And yet I think I could guess, if I tried.

Mr. Potter: Why, ye may guess, sir — this be a free country — leastways, fules say so.

Sir John: One, I think, must be Mr. James Sturton. Am I right?

Mr. Potter: Why, as to that, sir, I answers plain and to the point as there be nobody nowhere breathin' as can get s' much flavour into a jugged 'are ekal to old Pen — except Peter Bunkle as keeps the Cross over tu Alfriston.

Sir John: And the second is Lord Sayle. Am I wrong?

Mr. Potter: Why, as to that, sir, Potter don't say nothing. Du 'ee know Lord Sayle?

Sir John: I have met him.

Mr. Potter: Friend o' yourn, sir?

Sir John: So much so that I have determined to drive him out of the country, or kill him.

(Here Mr. Potter dropped the rabbit.)

Mr. Potter: Well . . . love my limbs! Kill — hist! But . . . but you, sir? Axing your pardon, but you aren't got the look of a killer.

Sir John: Thank you, Mr. Potter, I rejoice to hear it.

Mr. Potter: But — ki — hist! He be pretty big and pretty fierce, sir, an' you, axing y'r pardon, ain't exactly —

Sir John: An elephant or a tiger — and yet I feel myself perfectly able to accomplish one or the other, Mr. Potter.

Mr. Potter: Well, love my eyes! He be a fightin' man, too, sir! Somebody stuck a sword into him lately, I hear, but it did n't do no good, he be as well and 'earty as ever. Now if — hist!

(Here Mr. Potter paused, finger on lip, to glance stealthily around.)

Sir John: If what, Mr. Potter?

Mr. Potter: (Drawing near and speaking in hushed voice) If you be . . . set on a-doin' of it . . . very determined on . . . the deed, sir, your best way is to—hist! A pistol . . . no, a musket . . . some good dark night. Hist—Potter's mum!

Sir John: You don't love him, I think?

Mr. Potter: Love him? Well, there be things 'as 'appened 'ereabouts as no one can't swear agin nobody, d' ye see, an' yet . . . old Pen knows more than she dare speak, I rackon, an' Potter ain't blind nor yet deaf.

Sir John: What kind of things?

Mr. Potter: Well, theer was poor Dick Hobden as went a-walkin' one evenin' Windover way wi' Lucy Price, a rare handsome lass. Poor Dick were found stone dead next day, but the lass vanished an' nobody never seen her no more, nor never will, I reckon.

Sir John: Vanished?

Mr. Potter: Ay, like Mary Beal as disappeared and came back and drownded of 'erself, pore lass. There was Ruth Wicks as likewise vanished an' was found weeks arterwards singin' in the dark atop o' Windover . . . died mad, she did. There was other lasses as disappeared from Wilmington an' Litlin'ton an' never come back.

Sir John: A hateful tale!

Mr. Potter: It be, sir.

Sir John: And whom do you suspect?

Mr. Potter: Mum for that, sir! But there be folk as Potter would be j'yful to 'ave the skinnin' of—"

Sir John: You mean my Lord Sayle and Sturton—

Mr. Potter: Hist—sir! Speak soft! I don't mean nothin'. Only what one bids t' other obeys. . . . And now Lord Sayle swears he'll ruin all on us—every man an' bye, ah, wumman, maid an' babe, not forgettin' wives an' widders.

Sir John: How so?

Mr. Potter: He 's took an oath to put down "the trade," d' ye see. Potter be a inoffensive creater' as never drawed steel in his life — except mebbe now and then — I prefers a short bat . . . and never fired a shot in all my days — except p'r'aps once or twice an' then only when com-pelled. . . . Ah, a peaceable man be Potter, but . . . !

Here Mr. Potter laid finger to lip and looked slantwise at Sir John beneath lifted eyebrow. And then old Penelope called them; and, glancing round, Sir John was amazed to behold her clad in a sumptuous gown whose voluminous silken folds lent her a strangely arresting dignity, while upon her snowy hair was a mob cap marvellously be-laced.

"Aye, it be real silk, young man!" quoth she, with a little shake in her voice. "List to it rustle!" And sighing ecstatically, she spread out the rich folds with her gnarled old fingers. "There bean't a grander dress nowhere. . . . Jarge give it me las' Christmas. 'Tidn't often I wears it, no . . . but when I die, I 'll be buried in it — won't I, Jarge?"

"Aye, aye, Pen!" nodded Mr. Potter. "But, Lord — 'oo 's a-talkin' o' dyin'! Be the kittle a-bilin'?"

"Aye, lad, tea 's ready. As for you, young man, if you 'll drink wi' me as they name witch, an' bean't frut-tened lest I blast 'ee wi' a look o' my eye — come your ways to tea."

Following her into the cottage, Sir John beheld yet other unexpected wonders, as the handleless cups of exquisite ware, the beautiful Chinese teapot, the tray of priceless Chinese lacquer.

"Aha, you may stare, young man!" nodded old Penelope. "There bean't a lady in arl the land can show 'ee sech chaney as mine. . . . Jarge give it tu me!"

"Why, ye see, sir," added Mr. Potter apologetically, "I bean't married!"

"An' look at the lace in my cap, young man . . . real French point — arl from Jarge."

"Why, ye see, sir," quoth Mr. Potter again, "I aren't got no sweet'eart!"

And thus Sir John Dering, sitting between old Penelope Haryott the witch, and Mr. George Potter the guileless, drank smuggled tea out of smuggled china, talked and listened, asked questions and answered them, and enjoyed it all uncommonly well.

## CHAPTER XVI

### Describes a Scandalous Item of Fashionable Intelligence and the Consequences Thereof

"The Barrasdaile" was back in town and all the beaux of Mayfair were agog, and forthwith hasted to give her welcome. They came by coach, in sedan chairs, on horseback and afoot; battered beaux wise in wine and women, sprightly beaux wise in town gossip and the latest mode, youthful beaux wise in nothing as yet; but one and all they gathered from every point of the compass and clad in all the colours of the spectrum, passioning for her wealth, eager for her rank, allured by her youth, or smitten by her beauty, agreeable to their own respective ages and conditions; they came to flourish hats gracefully, shoot ruffles languidly, flutter handkerchiefs daintily, tap snuff-boxes dreamily, to stare, ogle, smile, frown, sigh and languish, each according to his nature. And chief amongst these, my Lord Sayle, more completely assured of himself than usual, if it were possible; and this by reason that His Majesty (so gossip had it) was about to reinstate him in the royal favour and make him Lord-Lieutenant of his county besides, on condition that he put down the damnable practice of smuggling in his neighbourhood. Be this as it may, it was an indisputable fact (rumour was positive on this point) that His Majesty had received him, deigned him a nod, and chattered at him in German, whereupon other gentlemen immediately bowed to him, renewed acquaintance and congratulated him in English. Thus my Lord Sayle found himself in very excellent spirits.

Now upon the very morning of my Lady Barrasdaile's so triumphant return, it befell that *The Satyric Spy, or Polite Monitor,* most scandalous and (consequently) most

carefully perused of journals, came out with the following items of fashionable intelligence:

Lady H——a B——e, whose sudden and inexplicable desertion so lately made of Mayfair a dreary waste, hath been seen driving post for Paris. Paris doubtless awaited her with yearing expectation, but yearned vainly. For, upon the highway this bewitching she (*mirabile dictu*) vanished utterly away. Paris received her not, Dieppe knew her not! Whither she vanished, by what means, to what end, at what precise minute of the day or night, or precisely where this astounding disappearance took place, these be questions answerable but by her bewitching self.

But

It is furthermore credibly reported that Sir J——n D——g, whose triumphs in the Paphian Fields have made him notorious and the envy of lesser humans not so fortunate, left Paris abruptly two or three days ago, and hath been observed in company with a pretty serving-maid, a buxom waiting-wench whose humble situation in life is completely off-set by the potency of her peerless charms. Sir J——n D——g, quick to recognise the goddess despite her homespun, is become her very devoted slave and adorer. It is thought that he may carry her eventually London-wards to out-rival the unrivalled Barrasdaile.

*Nota Bene:* He that runs may read! Who seeth through a brick wall cannot be blind. Yet whoso addeth two and two and maketh of them five must be a bad arithmetician. *Verb. Sap.*

The Wench Supreme: or A Lament for Languishing Ladies

Sir J——n D——g who in smug world censorious
Hath, wooing, won himself a fame notorious,
E'en from one scene of triumphs late hath flown
Triumphant still, since flees he not alone;
But with him (let not Scandal from Truth blench)
Doth bear away a strapping waiting-wench
A wench of wenches she (come aid me, Muse,
And teach me what just synonyms to use!)
A wench, a maid, a nymph, nay, goddess rather,
Though smutty chimney-sweep perchance her father!

Thus hath Sir J——n the latest fashion showed
And mating so, made serving-maids the mode!
Ye sprightlies proud! Ye high-born dames despair
Weep pearly tears and rend your powdered hair
Forgo that fond, that secret-cherished hope
That ye yourselves might, one day, thus elope:
Since FASHION and Sir J——n do both decree
No LADY may, except a WENCH she be!

Mayfair was powerfully and profoundly stirred: elegant gentlemen, having perused these extracts from *The Polite Monitor* hurriedly to themselves, forthwith hasted to read them aloud, and with due deliberation, to all who would listen; they were the main topic of discussion in every fashionable club and coffee-house. Fine ladies, old and young, becked and nodded over their Bohea, etc., lifted censorious eyebrows, whispered behind their fans, and, learning my lady was in town, promptly ordered coach or chair and were borne incontinent to my lady's house in St. James's Square, each and every armed with a copy of *The Polite Monitor*, and all eager to pour oil on the flames as lovingly as possible.

Meanwhile, Herminia, Lady Barrasdaile, that spoiled child of fortune, having sworn at her meek maid and snubbed her doting Aunt Lucinda into angry revolt, sat scowling at the reflection of her beauteous self in the mirror, with this same scandalous "hateful" journal crumpled in passionate fist.

"O mem!" wailed the faithful Betty, "if you 'd only took my advice—"

"Hold your tongue, creature!"

"Yes, my lady! But if you 'd only not run away—"

"Peace, devilish female!"

"Yes, mem! But I told you how 't would—"

Here my lady launched a hairbrush, whereat Betty squealed and vanished.

"Thou 'rt so wild, Herminia!" exclaimed her diminutive aunt—"so woefully, wilfully wild! Such a masterful madcap like thy poor father before thee!"

"Would he were alive this day to . . . cram this hateful thing down somebody's throat!" cried my lady, hurling *The Polite Monitor* to the floor and stamping on it.

"Aye, but whose throat, child? 'T is what all the world will be asking — whose?"

"Whose, indeed!" repeated my lady between white teeth. "Let me but find him — let me but be sure!"

"Heavens, Herminia! — and what then?"

"Then, if I could find no better champion I'd . . . thrash or fight him myself!"

"Cease, child, cease! Remit thy ravings, 't is merest madness! Horrors, Herminia, how — "

"O Aunt Lucy, a Gad's name cease gasping out alliterations on me — do!"

"Fie, miss! And you with your profane oaths and vulgar swearing indeed! Look at ye, with your great, strong body and hugeous powerful limbs! I protest thou 'rt positively — "

"Aunt, dare to call me 'strapping' or 'buxom' and I'll set you atop of the *armoire* yonder!"

"Nothing so feminine, Herminia!" retorted her very small aunt, with the utmost courage. "Brawny 's the word! Thou 'rt positively brawny, a brawn — " Here a pantherine leap, a muffled scream, and my lady's aunt, clasped in my lady's arms, was whirled to the top of a tall press in adjacent corner, there to dangle two very small and pretty feet helplessly, to clutch and cower and whimper to be taken down.

"'Faith, aunt," quoth my lady, "to see you so, none would ever believe you were a duchess and so great a lady."

"And I don't feel like one!" wailed the Duchess miserably. "How can I? O Herminia . . . child . . . my dear, prithee take me down. If I fall — "

"You won't fall, dear aunt — you never do!"

"I nearly did last time, minx!"

"Because you wriggled, aunt."

"I'll ha' this hateful thing destroyed!" cried the Duchess, striking the huge piece of furniture with a ridiculously small, white hand.

"Then I shall buy a bigger!" quoth my lady.

"Then I'll leave thee, thou vixenish child!"

"But you'd come back to me, thou dear little loved aunt."

"Aye, I should, thou great amiable wretch. Now pray lift me down like the sweet, gentle soul thou art, Herminia."

"Am I brawny, aunt?"

"Thou'rt a fairy elf! Take me down, child."

"As for fighting, aunt — "

"Thou couldst not, wouldst not, thou'rt too maidenly, too tender, too gentle . . . take me down!"

"But indeed, aunt, you know I can fence better than most men — aye, as well as Sir John Dering himself, I'll wager."

"That wretch! Pray lift me down, Herminia, dear."

"'Faith, aunt, perched so, you look like a girl o' fifteen!"

"And I'm woman of forty-five — "

"With scarce a white hair and never a wrinkle!"

"Indeed, child, I can feel 'em growing as I sit here, so prithee, my sweet love, lift me — "

But at this moment was a hurried knock and Mrs. Betty entered, cheeks flushed and mild eyes wider than usual.

"O my lady!" she exclaimed — "Company!"

"Betty!" cried the Duchess, "Come and take me down — this moment!"

"Oh, I dessent, your Grace. . . . O mem, there be company below . . . ladies, mem — crowds, and gentlemen!"

"Ah!" cried my lady between clenched teeth. "So they're here already — to tear and rend me, dammem!"

"Herminia!" cried the Duchess, scandalised, "Herminia, fie! Herminia, for shame! I gasp, child! Such language, miss — "

"Fits the occasion, aunt, so tush — and hush! Who 's below, Betty — the women, I mean?"

"Well, mem, I only got a glimp', but I 'spied my Lady Belinda Chalmers for one — "

"That detestable rattle! Who else?"

"My Lady Prudence Bassett was with her, mem."

"That backbiting vixen! And Mrs. Joyce Mildmay is with 'em, I 'll vow?"

"Yes, mem — "

"'T is this devilish *Monitor* hath brought 'em upon me, and they 're here to condole with me — the wretches!"

"But I'm with ye, child!" quoth the Duchess from her lofty perch, whence my lady hasted to lift her forthwith, holding her suspended in mid-air a moment to kiss her furiously ere she set her gently down.

"God bless you, aunt, for a sweet, kind little soul! But I'll not see 'em — yes, I will, and you shall come too! Yet no," sighed my lady, "no, 't were better I front their claws alone — the cats. Come you to my rescue should they inflict themselves on me too long, dearest." And having, with Mrs. Betty's deft aid, smoothed her silks and laces, having patted and pulled at rebellious curls, my lady descended the broad stair and swept into the great reception-room, where a group of chattering ladies rose with one accord, chattering fond epithets, to embrace her, kiss, fondle and stare at her with eyes that took in for future reference every item of her apparel, every gesture, glance and flicker of her eyelash.

"My dearest Herminia, welcome back to town!" cried Lady Belinda, with a pouncing kiss. "How vastly well you 're looking . . . though a little worn, of course . . . a trifle pale, my love!"

"Pale, indeed!" sighed Lady Prudence, "and small wonder, my sweet soul, for who would not look pale and haggard under the circumstances?"

"And such circumstances, Herminia love!" gasped Mistress Joyce, shuddering and turning up her large blue eyes soulfully. "To think thy fair, unblemished

name should be even remotely associated with that — that monster, Sir John Dering! My heart bleeds for thee, thou poor, injured dear!" At this, every other lady sighed also and shuddered in unanimous horror, while the gentlemen scowled, nodded, rapped snuff-boxes loudly, snuffed ferociously and voiced their sentiments of indignant abhorrence.

"A dem'd, lying scandal, by Heaven!" exclaimed Lord Verrian.

"A dooced scandalous lie, on my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Prescott.

"Such infernal, audacious, dem'd impertinence should not be permitted for a dem'd moment, by Gad!" quavered fierce old Lord Aldbourne.

"Paper should be publicly burned!" quoth Captain Armitage.

"And the impudent editor-fellow instantly hanged!" added my Lord Sayle fiercely, while divers other gentlemen said much the same and quite as ferociously.

"You are alluding to the report in *The Monitor*, I think?" inquired my lady serenely.

"Indeed, yes, my dearest!" answered Lady Belinda, languishing. "To the — the scandalous notice concerning you, my love, and that — that infamous Dering creature! Needless to say, dear Herminia, we are all positively sure that 't is basely false — a most wicked invention not worthy a moment's credit, though, to be sure — you was in France very lately, my sweet soul, was you not?"

"Yes, dear Herminia," sighed Lady Prudence, "and Mr. Scarsdale here assures us that he met and spoke with Sir John Dering on the road between Dieppe and Paris! Is it not so, sir?"

"Beyond all question, ladies!" answered Mr. Scarsdale, stepping forward and bowing with a flourish. "Not only did I see Sir John, but conversed with him —"

"Eh — eh?" cried old Lord Aldbourne pettishly, curving talon-like fingers about his ear. "Eh, sir — cursed with him, d' ye say? What about, pray?"

"I said 'conversed,' my lord," answered Mr. Scarsdale, flushing a little.

"Then dammit, sir, speak up, sir!" commanded his ancient lordship. "Be good enough to remember that my dem'd ears are not so young as they were!"

"As I was saying," pursued Mr. Scarsdale, making the most of the occasion, "I met Sir John Dering by chance at a wayside inn, not twenty miles from Paris, and had some conversation with him."

"Why then, sir," quoth my lady, "'t is like you saw this 'wench,' this 'nymph,' this 'goddess in homespun'?"

"Egad, my lady," smirked Mr. Scarsdale, "now you mention it, I did—"

"Hid?" cried Lord Aldbourne. "What did ye hide for, sir, and where?"

"My lord, I say that I caught a brief glimpse of Sir John Dering's 'buxom wench'!"

"Oh, rat me, but did ye so, Scarsdale?" piped Mr. Prescott. "And was she handsome indeed—come?"

"Let me parish, sir, if she was n't!" cried Mr. Scarsdale, ecstatic. "A magnificent crayture, on my life! A plum, sir, a glorious piece—"

"We believe you, sir!" quoth Captain Armitage. "Dering ever had an infallible eye, a most exact judgment!"

"And pray, sir, what was she like?" demanded my lady, rising and approaching the speaker. "Be very particular. Was she dark or fair? And her features . . . her face, sir, was it round or oval—"

"She was dark, my lady, dark as night!" answered Mr. Scarsdale. "As to her face . . . her face, my lady . . ." Here, meeting my lady's glance, he faltered suddenly, his eyes opened wider, his heavy mouth gaped slightly, and he seemed to experience some difficulty with his breath.

"Well, sir!" demanded my lady. "What was she like?"

"She was . . . very beautiful . . . beyond description

. . ." mumbled Mr. Scarsdale, heedless of Lord Aldbourne's vociferous demands that he would "speak up and be dem'd!"

"Was I there?" questioned my lady relentlessly.

"No, no . . . no, indeed, madam."

"And yet you saw me!" she laughed scornfully and turned her back upon his pitiable discomfiture. "For, O dear friends," she cried, "dear my loving friends, for once our *Monitor* doth not lie! Aye, indeed, 't is all true — every word on 't. I was the serving-wench Mr. Scarsdale was so kind to favour with his notice — 't is all true!"

"Heaven save us!" ejaculated Lady Belinda faintly, then uttered a stifled scream and closed her eyes. "I sink!" she gasped. "I swoon! O my poor Herminia, beware! Think, mem, think what you are saying! Oh, I am shocked. . . . 'T is dreadful!"

But here my lady laughed joyously, while all watched her in more or less scandalised amaze — all save Mr. Scarsdale, who was mopping damp brow in corner remote.

Her merriment subsiding, my lady arose and, standing before them, proud head aloft, told her tale.

"Some of you know that I have long entertained the deepest animosity against Sir John Dering, and with just cause — "

"We did!" quoth Lady Belinda, tossing her head.

"We do, madam!" answered Captain Armitage gravely.

"And most of you are, I think, acquainted with that impetuous boy, Viscount Templemore, who, inspired by some rash word of mine concerning Sir John Dering, started for Paris with some wild notion of becoming my champion and forcing Sir John to fight him. Hearing of this madness, I set off in immediate pursuit, but my coach broke down and, thus delayed, and to while away a dreary hour, I wrapped myself in my maid's cloak and walked out to watch the moon rise, and thus, by the merest chance, met Sir John himself, who, it seemed, had left Paris ere the duel could take place. All of you, I think, are aware of Sir John's overweening pride and ar-

rogance, and I determined to make this fortuitous meeting a means of humbling his pride and tramping his lofty self-esteem in the dust. Judge now if I have succeeded or no! Sir John mistook me for a serving-maid, whereupon I acted the part of shy, country simpleton to such perfection — Mr. Scarsdale saw me in the part, you 'll remember, and was equally deceived — were you not, Mr. Scarsdale?"

But that gentleman had softly and discreetly taken his departure.

"Well, dear my friends, the end of it was, I very soon had Sir John sighing and languishing to such degree that I ran away with him — "

"Madam!" exclaimed Lady Belinda.

"O heavens!" gasped Lady Prudence.

"Until he thought me safe, and then — I ran away from him — left him, with a flea in his ear, disconsolate — to mourn and seek his shy, humble, rustical wench as he is doubtless doing at this very moment — "

"Tee — hee!" laughed ancient Lord Aldbourne, slapping feeble knee with veinous hand. "Dering — that terror o' husbands! Hee-he! Oh, sink me! Jilted, bilked and made a dem'd, everlasting fool of by a serving-wench! Oh, split me!" And my lord laughed until he choked, and would have rolled to the floor but for the Captain's ready arm.

And now, as she turned, my lady found my Lord Sayle beside her.

"By Heaven, madam!" he exclaimed, his assurance no whit abated, "I protest 't was marvellous well done, egad! We entertained an angel unawares; 't was your divine self that honoured us, after all, then."

"Indeed, sir!" she retorted in fierce scorn, "and 't was your base self that I scorned then, as I do now — and ever shall!" And she left him to scowl after her while the room buzzed with talk and laughter.

"That Dering, of all men, should be so flammed! O monstrous rich!"

"When this gets round . . . alas, poor Sir John! Ha, ha!"

"Poor Dering . . . every coffee-house in town will ring with the tale!"

"He will never dare show his face in London after this!" etc. etc., until the long room echoed again.

Then the tall, folding doors were opened almost unnoticed, and a gorgeous menial solemnly announced:

"Sir John Dering!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### How Sir John Dering Came Back to Mayfair

For a moment, it seemed, none spoke or moved; all faces turned towards the slender, elegant figure on the threshold, where stood Sir John, his most exquisite self. Thus he entered amid a strange hush, a silence broken only by the tap of his high-heeled shoes; and, aware of the many staring eyes, saw only those of her who stood drawn to her noble height, in all the dignity of laces and brocade; and, very conscious of the latent hostility all about him, advanced down the long room with a leisured ease, apparently totally unconscious of all save my lady and his serene and placid self.

Haughty and unbending she stood to meet him, with no smile of greeting, no hand to welcome him. Thus his bow was of the deepest and his voice of the gentlest when he spoke.

"My Lady Barrasdaile, this is a moment I have oft dreamed on, and, by my soul, madam, now that I see you at last, your face and form remind me powerfully of one whom I found — and have lost awhile! My lady, behold your most faithful, obedient, grateful servant!"

For a long moment she viewed him with a vague disquiet, then, as she thus hesitated, the doors were thrown wide to admit the diminutive Duchess, very dignified as became her rank, and mounted upon a pair of extremely high-heeled shoes; at whose advent went up a murmur of polite salutation, backs were dutifully bent, handkerchiefs fluttered, and gowns billowed to elaborate curtseys; in the midst of which, my lady spoke:

"Dear aunt, you come pat to the occasion as usual! Permit me to present to you Sir John Dering. Sir John, the Duchess of Connington!"

A moment of utter stillness — a dramatic moment

wherein noble gentlemen gazed dumbly expectant and fair ladies thrilled and palpitated in delightful suspense while the Duchess, that small yet potent arbiter, scrutinised Sir John in silent appraisement; at last, smiling, she reached forth her hand.

"Welcome to town, Sir John!" said she as he bowed low above her very small fingers.

Gentlemen breathed again, ladies fanned themselves and chattered; the fiat had gone forth: Her Grace of Connington had received the "dreadful creature" who consequently could not be too dreadful for Mayfair.

Thus Sir John was duly presented to ladies who blushed and simpered, drooped tremulous lashes, languished soulfully or frowned austerely according to which best became her particular type of beauty; and to gentlemen who bowed and protested themselves his devoted, humble, etc., until he found himself confronted by one, a fierce-eyed gentleman with one arm in a sling, this, who surveyed him from head to foot with an expression of arrogant contempt.

"Sir John Dering, is it," he demanded, "or Mr. Derwent — which?"

"You may have your choice, sir," answered Sir John pleasantly, "for each of 'em is equally at your service the moment you feel yourself sufficiently recovered, my lord!" And Sir John made to pass on, but Lord Sayle interposed, his air more threatening than ever. Quoth he:

"Sir John Dering, or Derwent, or whatever name you happen to be using — last time we met, sir — "

"To be sure," smiled Sir John amiably, "I advised your lordship to take fencing lessons — "

"Tee-hee!" screeched old Lord Aldbourne suddenly. "Hee-ha! Fencing lessons! Oh, smite me!"

Sir John slipped nimbly aside just in time to escape my Lord Sayle's passionate fist; then the two were borne apart amid an indignant whirl of embroidered coat-skirts.

"Shame, my lord, shame!" cried half a dozen voices, while ladies screamed, moaned, grew hysterical, and made

instant preparation to swoon in their most becoming attitudes.

"O Ged!" screeched Lord Aldbourne above the hubbub, "I never saw such a dem'd disgraceful exhibition in all my dem'd life! Sayle, you must be mad or dem'd drunk, sir . . . in a ladies' drawing-room full o' the dear creeters . . . oh, dem!" And then, high-pitched, cold and merciless rose my lady's voice.

"My Lord Sayle, pray have the goodness to retire. Your manners are better suited to your country taverns. Begone, sir, ere I summon my servants!"

In the awful silence that ensued my Lord Sayle stared vaguely about him like one stupefied with amazement, then, striding to the open door, he stood striving for coherent speech, and when at last utterance came, he stammered thickly:

"You . . . you shall regret . . . bitterly . . . bitterly! Aye, let me perish but you shall!" Then, flinging up his uninjured arm in passionate menace, he turned and was gone.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### How Sir John Dering Went A-wooing

My Lord Sayle's abrupt departure sufficed to break up the assembly; my lords and ladies having been very delightfully amused, interested, thrilled and shocked by the varied incidents of the last crowded hour, hasted to be gone, eager to recapitulate the whole story (with numerous additions, to be sure) to the astounded ears of those unfortunates who had missed so singular an occasion.

Thus, while my lady bid adieu to her guests (each and all more her doting friends and obedient humble servants than ever), Sir John presently found himself alone with the Duchess in a curtained alcove, and stooping, took her so small hand ere she was aware to kiss it with such reverence that she actually flushed.

"Oh heavens, sir!" she exclaimed. "Pray, why so — so infinite impressive?"

"Madam," he answered gravely, "despite the evil that is told of me, with more or less truth, alas, you were generous! Having the power to abase me, you mercifully chose to lift me up. Pray believe that my gratitude is yours, now and ever!"

"Indeed," said she, noting his earnest face, "you are strangely unlike the Sir John Dering I anticipated. Your — your reputation, sir —"

"Aye, my reputation!" he repeated wearily. "'Faith, madam, 't is my incubus that hath me in a strangle-gripe. For years I have endured it with a fool's content, but now when I would be rid on't I may not. 'T is a haunting shadow, a demon mocking my best endeavours. Evil is naturally expected of me, virtue — never. Indeed, you behold in me the poor victim of a relentless fate —"

"Fate, sir?" cried a scornful voice, and my Lady Herminia stepped into the alcove.

"Even so, madam!" he answered, rising to bow.

"Heaven preserve us!" she exclaimed. "Do you dare put the onus of your own misdemeanours upon Fate?"

"Nay, then," he answered, "let us call it Fortune, madam, since Fortune is — feminine, and esteemed ever a fickle jade!"

"So, sir, having contrived yourself an evil notoriety, you would turn cynic and rail upon Fate, it seems!"

"Nay, madam, cursed by cruel Fortune, I am become a Man o' Sentiment and find in simple things the great and good content: the carolling bird, the springing flower, the rippling brook, these have charms the which — "

"Tush, sir, you grow lyrical, which becometh you most vilely."

"Fie, Herminia!" cried the Duchess. "Hold thy teasing tongue, miss. Sir John is right, indeed — I myself love to hear the carolling brook — I mean the rippling bird — There, see how you ha' fluttered me! Sit down, Herminia — do! And you, Sir John! Be seated — both o' you, instead of standing to stare on each other like — like two fond fools foolishly fond! So! Now, surely, Sir John, a man's reputation is his own, to make or mar?"

"Nay, 'faith, your Grace, doth not a man's reputation make or mar him, rather? And whence cometh reputation but of our friends and enemies who judge us accordingly. So the world knows us but as they report. Thus, he or she that would be held immaculate should consort solely with dogs or horses that ha' not the curse of speech."

Here my lady sighed wearily and began to tap with impatient foot.

"Herminia, hush!" exclaimed the Duchess. "Hush and flap not fidgeting foot, miss. How think you of Sir John's argument?"

"I think, aunt, that Sir John, according to Sir John, doth make of Sir John a creature so unjustly defamed that one might look to see Sir John sprout wings to waft good Sir John from this so wicked world. And pray, Sir

John, may we ask to what we owe the unexpected honour of your presence here?"

"Alas, madam," he sighed, "to what but matrimony! I am here in the matter of marriage."

The Duchess gasped and strove to rise, but her niece's compelling hand restrained her.

"Pray, sir, whose marriage?"

"My own, madam. You behold me ready to wed you how, when and where you will."

"Oh, then," quavered the Duchess, "oh, pray, sir, ere you continue — I'll begone. . . . Herminia, suffer me to rise —"

"Nay, aunt, rather shall you suffer along with me —"

"Loose me, love!" implored the Duchess. "Unhand me, Herminia, I will not remain. . . . I cannot. — So awkward for Sir John . . . for me! Oh, horrors, Herminia!"

"Horrors indeed, dear aunt, but we'll bear 'em together."

"But — O child! A proposal — and I here! So indelicate! I'm all of a twitter, I vow!"

"So am I, aunt. So shalt thou sit here with me and hear Sir John's comedy out, poor though it be. And Sir John ever performs better with an audience, I'll vow!"

"O sir!" wailed the little Duchess helplessly, "you see how I'm constrained! Herminia is so — so strapping and strong! I may not stir, indeed!"

"Aunt!"

"And brutishly brawny, sir."

"Aunt Lucinda!"

"Ha!" exclaimed Sir John, "a most excellent phrase, your Grace!" And out came his memorandum forthwith. "'Bewitching but brutishly brawny is she.' Here is metre with an alliterative descriptiveness very delightfully arresting! And now, mesdames, I am come most solemnly to sue the hand of my Lady Barrasdaile in marriage —"

"Then," she retorted angrily, "all things considered, sir, I demand to know how you dare?"

"Not lightly, madam, believe me!" he answered gravely; "but matrimony no longer daunts me; having made up my mind to't I am ready to face it undismayed, to endure unflinching — "

"Sir, you insult me!"

"Madam, if I do, you are the first and only woman I have so insulted."

"Remember the past, sir — its horrors — "

"Think of the future, madam, its joys. As my wife — "

"Heaven save and deliver me, sir!" she exclaimed scornfully. "Do you for one moment imagine I would contemplate a situation so extreme horrid?"

"But indeed, my lady, despite what the cynics say, marriage hath much to commend it. More especially a union 't twixt you and me, our natures being so extreme the opposite of each other."

"That, indeed, is true, I thank heaven!" she nodded.

"Alas, yes, my lady. You being of a somewhat violent, shall we say — ungovernable temper — "

"Too tragically true!" murmured the Duchess behind her fan.

"Aunt, pray be silent!"

"The *armoire*, child!"

"Do not distract me, aunt. Sir, you are an insolent impertinent!"

"But of a nature serenely calm, madam, to temper your excessive cholers. Indeed, we are each other's opposites, for whiles you are something ungentle, very headstrong, extreme capricious and vastly vindictive, I am — "

"Utterly detestable, sir!" she cried indignantly. "Enough — enough! Good Gad! must I sit and hear you thus abuse me? Forbid it, heaven! Is it not enough affliction that my name should be coupled with yours in the scandalous columns of an infamous journal?"

"Can you possibly mean *The Polite Monitor*, madam?" he sighed.

"What else, sir? And you ha' read the hateful thing as a matter of course!"

"No, my lady. I wrote it."

"You, Sir John!" exclaimed the Duchess.

"You — 't was you?" cried my lady.

"Myself!" quoth Sir John. "'T was writ in haste and hath small merit, I fear, and little to commend it, but such as 't is —"

"Commend it!" cried my lady. "Commend it! Oh, this is too much; you are insufferable! Sir John Dering, you weary me, you may retire!" And magnificently disdainful, she arose.

Sir John's bow was Humility manifest.

"Madam," sighed he, "I am now as ever your ladyship's most obedient, humble servant. I go — yet first o' your mercy and in justice to myself, pray tell us when 't will be?"

"What, sir, in heaven's name?"

"Our wedding. When will you marry me, Herminia?"

"Never — oh, never!" she cried passionately. "I had rather die first!"

"Alas, Herminia, for your so passionate refusal!" he mourned. "Tush, my lady, for your choice o' death! And for thy so arrogant, unruly self — fare thee well. So must I to the country there to seek my Rose. . . . O Rose o' love, my fragrant Rose. . . . God keep thee, my Lady Herminia, and teach thee more of gentleness. Duchess, most generous of women — adieu!"

So saying, Sir John bowed, and, wistful and despondent, took his departure.

"Aunt," cried her ladyship, when they were alone, "in heaven's name, why did you?"

"Why did I what, miss?"

"Receive that — that — man?"

"Perhaps because he — is a man, Herminia. Perhaps because he is the man to mould and master you. Perhaps because of his wistful, wondering, woman's eyes. Perhaps because you — wished me to — ha! Why must ye blush, child, pink as a peony, I vow!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### Tells How Sir John Went "Bear-Baiting"

From St. James's Square Sir John directed his chair to an address in Mount Street, and was so fortunate as to meet Captain Armitage stepping forth to take the air; hereupon they flourished their hats at each other, bowed, and thereafter stood at gaze.

"Armitage," quoth Sir John, "time worketh change and five years is a long time!"

"Dering," answered the Captain, with his pleasant smile, "five years shall be as many hours — minutes, if ye'll have it so!"

"Tommy!" exclaimed Sir John, and held out his hand.

"Jack!" exclaimed the Captain, and shook it heartily. "'S life!" cried he. "'S death! Egad! . . . 'od rat me but this is infinite well, upon my soul it is! Are ye home for good?"

"I hope so, Tom." Then, having paid his chairmen, Sir John slipped a hand within the Captain's arm and they walked on together.

"Tom," said he, gently interrupting his companion's joyous reminiscences of their schoolboy escapades and later follies — "Tommy, art minded for a little gentle sport?"

"Anything ye will, Jack," answered the Captain eagerly, "for, demme, the town's dead at this hour . . . a curst dog-hole, rat me! Say the word and I'm yours. What's to do?"

"Bear-baiting, Tom."

"Hey? Bear-baiting? What the —"

"D'ye happen to know which particular coffee-house my Lord Sayle affects?"

"Eh — Sayle?" repeated the Captain, halting suddenly. "Sayle, is it? Oh, demme! D'ye mean —"

"My Lord Sayle!" nodded Sir John.

"But . . . bear-baiting, Jack? O man, Lord love ye, 't is pure to ha' ye back; the town's alive again, or will be, burn me if 't won't! Sayle, eh? So soon, Jack! Egad, 't is like ye! . . . Bear-baiting. Oh, demme!" And the Captain halted again to laugh.

"And which coffee-house, Tom —"

"Why, y' see, Jack, the fellow's not dared show his face in town o' late in consequence o' that last 'affair' of his with poor young Torwood . . . but . . . I remember him at Will's, last year, aye, and Lockett's."

To Will's coffee-house accordingly they directed their steps, and here, as luck would have it, found the unconscious object of their quest.

My Lord Sayle was in a corner of the long room, his back to the door and surrounded by gentlemen who sipped their various beverages, snuffed or sucked at their long, clay pipes, while drawers hovered silently to and fro, obedient to their commands; thus Sir John and the Captain entered almost unnoticed, and, securing an adjacent table, Sir John ordered a bottle of burgundy.

"Burgundy — O Ged!" demurred the Captain.

"You shan't drink it, Tom!" murmured Sir John.

My Lord Sayle, as one who had more than once killed "his man," and was, moreover, reputed to be in high favour at court just at present, was assured of a respectfully attentive audience wheresoever he went.

Behold him, then, the room being oppressively warm, ensconced beside an open window and seated between his inseparable companions, Sir Roland Lingley, slim and pallid, and Major Orme, red and a little corpulent, and surrounded by divers other fine gentlemen who listened with more or less languid interest while he held forth on the heinous crime of smuggling.

"But, my lord," ventured a mild gentleman in a Ramillie wig, "surely there are worse sins than smuggling?"

"Ha, d' ye think so, sir, d' ye think so?" demanded my lord pettishly. "Then 't is so much the less to your

credit, sir. Damme, sir, how dare ye think so! I say smuggling is a damnable crime and shall be put down with a strong hand, sir! With relentless determination, and, begad, sir, I 'm the man to do it. I 'll purge Sussex yet ere I 'm done, aye — I will so!"

"But, my lord, I — I happen to know something of Sussex and — "

"And what 's this to me, sir?"

"Only that I understand the traffic is widespread and the Sussex smugglers are accounted desperate fellows and very cunning, as — "

"And I tell ye, sir, they are demn'd rogues and may be desperate as they will, but I 'll break 'em! Aye, by heaven, I will if I have to call in the soldiery and shoot 'em down!"

"'Twould be a little arbitrary, sir!" ventured the mild gentleman again.

"Arbitrary, sir — good! Such ha' been my methods all my life and always will be. Have ye any other observations to offer, sir?"

"No, my lord," answered the mild gentleman.

"Then I 'll ha' you know there are others besides smuggling rascals that I 'll deal with . . . others, aye . . . just so soon as my arm permits. And my method with them shall be just as arbitrary and — more to the point, sir, the point!" And my lord tapped the hilt of his small-sword.

"Tommy," exclaimed Sir John at this juncture, "'t is devilish sour wine, this! The properest place for 't is — out o' the window!" And, with a wide-armed, backward swing he sent the contents of his glass showering over the flaxen wig, wide shoulders and broad back of my Lord Sayle.

A gasping oath of angry amazement; a moment of horrified silence. . . .

"What, have I sprinkled some one, Tom?" questioned Sir John and, glancing over his shoulder, he seemed to notice my lord for the first time and laughed. "Why,

't is no matter, Tom," quoth he lightly, "'t was only that fellow Sayle. Shall we try another bottle?"

My Lord Sayle's chair was hurled aside, and he turned to leap at the speaker, but recoiled before the thrust of a gold-mounted cane.

"Sir," said Sir John, stabbing him off, "since no ladies are present you ha' my permission to swear until you weary, but you will do it at a distance — remain where you are — sir!"

My lord promptly cursed and swore until he had raved himself breathless.

"Tut, sir, tut-tut!" smiled Sir John. "Don't bluster from the coward's castle of an injured arm; come to me when you can mishandle your sword and I 'll send you back to bed again. . . . I think we 'll make it your right leg next time —"

At this, my lord's frenzy broke forth anew, a wild torrent of oaths, vituperations and murderous threats, while Sir John, holding him off with his cane, watched him with a serene satisfaction until once again my lord was constrained to pause for breath; whereupon Sir John continued:

"Give me leave to tell you, my Lord Sayle, that I account you a thing begotten in evil hour merely to cast a shadow i' the sun . . . hold off, my lord! . . . and esteem you of no more account. At the same time I seize this occasion to state publicly . . . pray, keep your distance, my lord! . . . that I, John Dering, being a man o' sentiment and also of action, do solemnly pledge myself to harass you on every available occasion until I either ha' the happiness of driving you out o' the country, or the misfortune to kill you."

Here my lord, becoming articulate again, roared and shouted for his sword, vowing he would fight left-handed. But now, despite the mad and terrible fury that shook him and the fell purpose that glared in his eyes as he raved thus, threatening death and damnation, clutching vainly at Sir John's elusive cane and stamping in baffled

rage, the contrast was so ludicrous that some one tittered nervously and then came laughter — an hysterical roaring, peal on peal, that nothing might check or subdue. Even the mild gentleman had caught the contagion and laughed until his Ramillie wig was all askew and himself doubled up, groaning in helpless mirth.

Even when my Lord Sayle, reeling like a drunken man, was half led, half carried out by his friends, the company rocked and howled, hooted and groaned, slapped themselves and each other, wailing in faint, cracked voices: thus their Gargantuan laughter waxed and grew until came the drawers to peep and gape; until pedestrians in the street below paused to stare and wonder.

"O Jack . . . O Jack!" wailed Captain Armitage. "Hold me . . . hit me, a mercy's name. . . . Sayle . . . vowing to ha' y'r blood and . . . clutching at a cane that . . . was n't there! . . . Swearing hell and fury and dancing . . . like a . . . dem'd marionette! O Lord! 'Begotten to be a shadow,' says you! . . . 'We 'll make it your . . . right leg . . . next time!' Oh, rat me, Jack! . . ."

"By heaven," gasped the mild gentleman, "here 's a tale! Every coffee-house will be . . . cackling with 't. My lord 's loved none too well . . . first on one leg, then . . . on t' other. . . ."

Presently, taking advantage of the general uproar, Sir John hasted to retire, followed by the Captain, still breathless but eager.

"Ha' ye any other bears to bait, Jack?" he inquired as they descended to the street.

"Not at present, Tom."

"So much the worse!" the Captain sighed. "Howbeit, I 'll not part with thee; we 'll see the night out together. First, dinner at the Piazza, and then — "

"Thank 'ee no, Tom! I 've affairs — "

"Aha — is she very fair?"

"I 'm a man o' business, Tom, and am in town for but a short time."

"Why, then, where are ye living, Jack?"

"At High Dering."

"Good Ged — the country!" exclaimed Captain Armitage, visibly shocked. "And y' are going back again to rusticate — you, of all men!"

"Immediately!"

"Cabbages and mangold-wurzels!" murmured the Captain. "Amazing! Unless — aha, some rustic nymph, perchance — some village Venus, eh, Jack?"

"Nay, Tom, smugglers and an ancient witch, rather. But what do you do these days?"

"Naught i' the world since I inherited save play the fool generally and make love to 'the Barrasdaile,' as the fashion is. And —"

"Sounds lamentably dreary, Tom."

"It is, Jack, it is!" sighed the Captain. "One wearies of everything, and 'the Barrasdaile' hath no heart! And, talking of her, she flammed and tricked thee finely, it seems!"

"She did, Tom. You 've heard the tale, then?"

"Aye, Jack, who has n't? 'T will be all over town by this, i' faith, but your ears should tingle, for 't was demnably against you! Disguised, Jack . . . dressed in her woman's clothes and you all unsuspecting, ha-ha!"

"And 't was she told you, was it?"

"Herself, Jack, this afternoon just before you made your dem'd dramatic appearance. And, rat me, but 't was pure! She had us all roaring with laughter at thy expense, old lad . . . demme, even the women forgot to be scandalised. To ha' flammed you of all men! She must ha' played the country innocent marvellous well!"

"She must indeed, Tom."

"Ye see, Jack, she never forgives —"

"A bad habit, Tom!"

"Aye!" nodded the Captain. "And 't is plain to see she hates thee — even yet!"

"And that is worse!" sighed Sir John.

"And she 's dev'lish clever and quick — for all her size.

Aye, a passionate creeter . . . a goddess . . . all fire, Jack, or freezing cold . . . she'll never"—here the Captain sighed heavily—"no, she'll never marry me, 't is sure—although—"

"Never, Tom!"

"Oh, begad!" exclaimed the Captain, startled. "Sink me, but ye seem dem'd sure about it!"

"Tommy, I am!"

"And why, pray?"

"Because if she ever marries any one, that one will be me."

"You—you, Jack! You of all men?" stammered the Captain.

"Myself!"

"Good Ged!" gasped the Captain. "But—"

"Good-bye!" quoth Sir John, and, seizing his companion's hand, he shook it heartily and went his airy way, leaving the Captain to stare after him quite dumbfounded.

## CHAPTER XX

### How Sir John Pledged His Word: With Some Description of the Properties of Snuff

The ancient town of Lewes was a-throng, its High Street full of cheery bustle. Here were squires and gentry in lace and velvet, farmers and yeomen in broadcloth and homespun, drovers and shepherds in smock-frocks and leggings; spurs jingled, whips cracked, staves and crooks wagged and flourished in salutation; horsemen and pedestrians jostled one another good-naturedly, exchanging news or shouting jovial greetings; wains and waggons creaked and rumbled, wheels rattled and hoofs stamped, a blithe riot of sounds, for it was market-day.

Now presently, down the hill from London, past the ancient church of St. Mary Westout, drove an elegant travelling-carriage, its panels resplendent with an escutcheon well known hereabouts, for, beholding it, all folk, both gentle and peasant, hasted to make way; so the blood-horses were reined up and the great chariot came to a stand before the portals of the White Hart Inn, whereupon it was surrounded by a crowd eager for sight of the grand personage whose rank and fame lifted him so high above the vulgar herd.

My Lord Sayle, being in a very black and evil humour, paid scant heed to the shy and somewhat perfunctory greeting accorded him by the spectators, but strode into the inn without deigning a glance right or left.

Forth hasted the bowing landlord to usher his distinguished guest to the best chamber; and my lord, scowling and mumchance, was about to mount the wide stairway when a young gentleman, descending in somewhat of a hurry, had the misfortune to jostle my Lord Sayle's wounded arm, and was murmuring an apology when my lord interrupted him with a roar that, almost immediately,

made them the centre of a curious, gaping crowd, the which served but to inflame my lord the more, and he raged until the place echoed of him.

"Damn ye, sir," he ended, "if ye were a man instead of a whey-faced lad I 'd give myself the joy of killing ye at the earliest moment!"

"Sir," retorted the unfortunate young gentleman, becoming paler still, "I venture to regard myself as a man, none the less —"

"Ha, do ye, sir? — do ye, indeed?" sneered my lord. "Tell him who I am, somebody!" This information being eagerly accorded, the young gentleman appeared to quail, and was about to speak when down the stair sped a young and beautiful woman.

"Jasper — O Jasper!" she cried; then, facing the company wide-eyed and pallid with terror, "Gentlemen," she pleaded, "my Jasper meant no offence — none, indeed —"

"Then let him make suitable apology!" quoth my lord.

"You hear, Jasper — you hear?"

"My lord," said the pale young gentleman, his lips painfully a-tremble, "I 'll see you damned first!"

At this the lady screamed, the company murmured, and my lord scowled.

"Sir," quoth he, "have the goodness to send your card to me upstairs! In three weeks or a month, I shall call you to account for your ill-mannered temerity — and your blood be on your own head!" So saying, my Lord Sayle strode up the stair, leaving the unfortunate young gentleman to support his half-swooning companion into an adjacent chamber amid the sympathetic murmurs of the company.

It was now that a second carriage drew up before the inn, an extremely dusty vehicle this and so very plain as to excite no more notice than did the slender, soberly clad person who lightly descended therefrom, a very ordinary-looking person indeed, except perhaps for a certain arrogant tilt of the chin and the brilliance of his long-lashed eyes.

Scarce had his foot touched pavement than he was greeted by a tall, square-shouldered man, extremely neat and precise as to attire, who escorted him forthwith into the inn.

"Well, Robert," said Sir John — or rather, Mr. Derwent — when they had found a corner sufficiently sequestered, "I rejoice to be back; these few days of town ha' sufficed. To your true man o' sentiment Rusticity hath a thousand charms, Bob. You agree, I think?"

"I do, sir."

"Old Mr. Dumbrell, for instance. He is well, I trust, Robert and — ?"

"They are, your honour!"

"And how go matters at High Dering?"

"Fairly quiet, sir."

"You have persevered in the harassing tactics I suggested in regard to our Mr. Sturton?"

"With the utmost per—sistence, sir."

"You quite understand that I — ha! I hear a woman weeping, surely?"

"Chamber in your rear, sir, door on your right!" answered Robert the Imperturbable; and he briefly recounted the incident of the unfortunate young gentleman.

"Perfect!" sighed Sir John. "Not vainly have I driven these weary miles in my Lord Sayle's dust. Let us relieve the lady's anxiety at once, Robert!" With a gentle, perfunctory rap, Sir John opened the door in question and beheld the unfortunate young gentleman on his knees beside the settle, striving vainly to comfort her who lay there in tearful misery.

"If he kills thee, Jasper — if he should kill thee!" she sobbed.

"Nay, dearest — beloved, he may not be so terrible as they say . . . he may but wound me —" Here the young gentleman sprang to his feet as Sir John spoke.

"Pray, forgive this intrusion, but I come to quell this lady's apprehensions, to bid her weep no more! For, sir, you cannot possibly fight my Lord Sayle —"

"But, sir — sir," stammered the pale young gentleman, "I . . . it seems I must. I have already accepted — "

"No matter, sir!" answered Sir John. "You cannot possibly cross steel with my Lord Sayle until I have had that pleasure, since mine is the prior claim, as I will instantly make apparent if you will trouble to step upstairs with me."

"But, sir . . . I . . . I don't understand!" murmured the young gentleman. "Pray, whom have I the honour to address?"

"My name is Dering, sir, John Dering — at your service."

"Dering!" exclaimed the young gentleman — "Sir John Dering of Dering?"

"Oh!" cried the lady, clasping trembling hands. "The duellist?"

Sir John bowed.

"And my name is Markham, sir — "

"Why, then, Mr. Markham, if you will accompany me upstairs — "

"Willingly, sir," answered Mr. Markham.

"O Jasper!" cried the lady. "He . . . you are not going to — fight?"

"No, no, dearest!"

"Madam," said Sir John in his gentlest voice, "I pledge my word this gentleman shall not fight my Lord Sayle now or at any other time — "

"You — oh, you are sure, sir?"

"Upon my soul and honour, madam!"

"Then go, Jasper, if you must. But be not long or I shall swoon or run mad!"

"She . . . my wife is . . . is not . . . very strong, sir," stammered the young gentleman as they ascended the broad stair with the imperturbable Robert at their heels.

"And so very young, sir!" said Sir John sympathetically.

My Lord Sayle was at wine, supported by his two com-

panions, Sir Roland Lingley and Major Orme, and surrounded by young bloods and country beaux who hearkened to his dicta eagerly and viewed with eyes of awesome envy this man who had flashed his terrible steel so often. My lord, used to such hero-worship, condescended to unbend, and was animadverting for their behoof upon the delicate point as to how and when and why to take up a quarrel, when he became aware of a stir at the door, of a quick, light footstep, of a holly-stick that with sudden, graceful twirl, swept decanter and glasses crashing to the floor in splintered ruin, of a face delicately pale and lighted by a pair of long-lashed eyes that glared down at him, and of Sir John Dering's high-pitched, drawling, hated voice:

"If there is any one present who feels himself in the very least affronted, I shall be most happy to accommodate him on the spot!" And, dropping the holly-stick, Sir John drew sword, before whose glitter the company drew back as one man.

"And who the devil might you be?" demanded a voice.

"My name, sirs, is John Dering, and I am here to tell Mr. Markham in your presence that he cannot fight my Lord Sayle since I have the prior claim, a claim I will forego to no man breathing. I am here also to tell you, gentlemen of Sussex, that I stand solemnly pledged to drive my Lord Sayle out o' the country or eventually kill him — whichsoever he desire, for — "

Here my Lord Sayle, who had remained like one entranced, staring up into the fiercely scornful eyes above him, succeeded in breaking the spell at last, and, roaring a savage curse, picked up the first thing to hand, which happened to be a snuff-box, and hurled it at his tormentor. But Sir John, ever watchful, avoided the missile, which, striking an inoffensive gentleman on the head, deluged him and those adjacent with snuff, a choking, blinding shower.

Hereupon, clapping perfumed handkerchief to nostrils, Sir John took up the holly-stick, slipped his hand within Mr. Markham's arm and sped from the room, leaving wild tumult and uproar behind.

Upon the landing, while he paused to sheathe his sword, the imperturbable Robert took occasion to transfer the door-key from inside to out, and having locked the gasping, groaning, cursing sufferers securely in, followed his master downstairs.

"Sir, how—" gasped Mr. Markham between his sneezes. "Sir John, how may I . . . a-tish . . . express my depths of—gratitude?"

"By hastening back to her who will be growing anxious for you, sir—"

"Aye, I will—I will, sir!" cried Mr. Markham. "You see, sir, she . . . I . . . we are hoping . . . expecting . . . a-tisha! . . . d' you understand, Sir John?"

"And give ye joy o' the event, Mr. Markham. My heartiest congratulations and best . . . asha!" Here Sir John sneezed violently in turn. "My best—aho—wishes for you and her and—it, sir!"

"Sir John," quoth Mr. Markham, grasping his hand, "should it be . . . a-tish! . . . a boy, sir, one of his names, if you'll permit, shall be . . . a-hoosh! . . . John, sir!"

"Mr. Markham, I . . . I feel myself extreme . . . shassho . . . honoured, sir. My felicitations to your lady, and good-bye!"

"Robert," quoth Sir John, when his sneezing had somewhat abated, "they seem to be making a confounded disturbance upstairs! What's that hammering, I wonder?"

"Gentlemen a-trying to get out, I opine, sir!"

"To get out, Bob?"

"Precisely, sir. You see, I happened to lock 'em in, your honour."

"Oh, did you, egad? Then we'd best be off and away before they break out. Are the horses ready?"

"All ready, sir—this way!"

So presently, having mounted in the yard, they rode off along the busy street and, winning clear of the traffic, set spurs to their spirited animals and had soon left the

historic town of Lewes behind them. Yet often Sir John must turn to view this ancient town, seeming to drowse in the afternoon's heat, its many-hued roofs of tile and thatch topped here and there by grey church spires; and over all the castle, with its embattled walls and towers, its mighty keep rising in grim majesty, hoary with age but glorious in decay.

## CHAPTER XXI

### Of George Potter, His Whistle

"Regarding Mr. Sturton," said Sir John, reining his horse to a walk when the old town had sunk from view behind them, "you perfectly understand, Robert, that I wish to give him sufficient rope to very thoroughly hang himself?"

"Pre-cisely, sir!"

"He hath no suspicions as yet of our identity?"

"None whatever, sir."

"'T is pity I declared my name at the inn yonder, Robert."

"Why, I don't see, sir, how Mr. Sturton is going to find out as you're Sir John Dering — I mean, that Mr. Derwent is Sir John Dering, or that Sir John Dering is Mr. Derwent, or that your honour is ekally both and each other, the very same i-dentical person both together at the very same, pre-cise moment, sir."

"It certainly sounds sufficiently involved, Bob. But I will confess the man puzzles me. I have even troubled to go through his accounts with my lawyers and they seem perfectly in order — and yet I know him for a rogue . . . and, moreover, he knocked me into a ditch and called me a 'lad'!"

"Lorramity!" exclaimed Robert, his imperturbability momentarily shaken.

"The term 'lad' rankles, Bob: the ditch I heartily forgive him, but — 'lad'!"

"The ex-pression, sir, so applied strikes me as blass-phemious, your honour!" Sir John laughed and became thoughtful, seeing which Robert reined his horse respectfully to the rear, and so they rode on for a while in silence, then:

"Robert!"

"Sir?"

"Have you seen Sir Hector recently?"

"Day afore yesterday, sir."

"How was he?"

"Doleful, sir. 'Doleful' is the only word for it! And, sir, he said a thing which, begging his pardon, I felt bound to deny."

"What was it, Bob?"

"Sir, he sets staring at his horses y-ears, being mounted, sir, and, 'Robbie,' says he, and remarkable bitter, sir, 'Robbie, women are the devil!' Whereupon, sir, I made so bold as to answer, 'Saving your presence, Sir Hector —some!'"

"Highly discriminating, Bob!" said Sir John. "Anything more?"

"Aye, sir, he did. 'Robbie,' says he, 'women ha' made fools o' men from the beginning!' says he. 'And so they will to the end! A plague on 'em!' says he, and spurs off at a gallop afore I could make retort ade-quate, sir."

"Hum!" murmured Sir John pensively. "As to our Mr. Sturton, have you felt yourself impelled to any further acts of —hostility, Bob?"

"Only very slightly, your honour. To be particular, the day afore yesterday, precise time three-thirty-five p.m., chancing to observe certain young female in —"

"Damsel, Robert!"

"Yes, your honour . . . in tears, sir, I stepped alongside of said young fe—"

"Maid, Robert!"

"Exactly, sir . . . and surprised Mr. S. addressing old Mr. Dumbrell with extreme vin-dictiveness, your honour, and old Mr. Dumbrell's hat in a puddle, sir. Whereupon, felt it urgent to wipe Mr. S.'s face with said hat, and so the action ended, sir. But, same evening, being approximately fifteen or, say, twelve minutes to nine o' the clock, observing Mr. S. berating old Dame Haryott in fashion out-rageous, felt called upon to re-

monstrate with said Mr. S., who, there and then, sir, did call up two fellows, very tough customers indeed, and ordered 'em to set about me, which they immediately did. Being thus outnumbered three to one, sir, attacked on both flanks and centre, I posted my rear agin a wall and was preparing to maintain position to extremity when, at critical moment, received reinforcements in shape of a man by name Potter, who played a small bludgeon most determined and with so nice a dexterity as 't was a pleasure to witness, with the happy result, sir, that the enemy drew off, leaving us masters o' the field, your honour, which happened to be Dame Haryott's front garden."

And what, Bob—what do you think of Mr. Potter?"

"That he's one as takes a deal o' knowing, sir. But, your honour, he happened to tell me a thing as set me wondering. He told me that Mr. S. walks over to The Black Horse at Wilmington very frequent, and there meets or con-sorts with Christopher Oxham, Lord Sayle's bailiff."

"Well, Robert?"

"Well, sir, I determined to follow Mr. S. . . . which I did . . . on-perceived, and got sight o' this Oxham, a big chap, very bold and loud-voiced. They seemed to have a deal to say, and, as they parted, Oxham says: 'My lord returns this week and the lads are all ready, so at word from you we'll act!'"

"At word from Sturton!" repeated Sir John, and rode awhile musing.

"Sir," said Robert, at last, "begging your pardon, but do you happen to believe in ghosts, spectres, phantoms and such-like apparitions?"

"Why, no, Bob; I can't say that I do. Why?"

"Well, I thought I did n't, sir, but that night I—saw one . . . aye, manifest, your honour!"

"How?" questioned Sir John, glancing up sharply. "You actually saw a ghost, Bob?"

"'Actually' is the word, sir. All I know is, that I saw something leaning over Wilmington Churchyard wall

. . . a thing, your honour . . . as I don't want to see again!"

"What sort of thing?"

"Well, sir, 't is hard to tell . . . and the light was bad . . . but it looked about eight foot high and had a pair o' horns a yard wide and more . . . tipped wi' fire! Aye, sir, I know it sounds outrageous, but it looked worse than it sounds! Mr. S. see it too . . . he was walking p'r'aps a dozen yards or so in my front and me creeping in his rear . . . and suddenly he gives a kind o' groan and dropped to his knees, then scrambles to his feet and away he goes at a run, gasping and groaning 'till he was out o' sight."

"And what did you, Bob?"

"Well, sir, chancing to have a pistol handy, I let fly . . . but though I'll swear my bullet took it clean through the head . . . it did n't do no good, sir, not a bit — quite the re-verse, your honour; the thing got up and danced at me, sir . . . aye, jigged it did — Lord!"

"And then, Bob?"

"Why, then, sir, I took to my heels and bolted, ah — a sight faster than Mr. S."

"Hum!" quoth Sir John. "I don't think you should have fired, Bob."

"No, sir?"

"No, you might have injured it! Besides, ghosts are supposed to be impervious to bullets, I believe. And the thing had horns, you say?"

"Sir, I'll lay my oath on its horns . . . ah, and fiery horns at that! And there's others have seen it too, before me."

"Who, Bob?"

"Well, there's Peter Bunkle for one, sir, as keeps The Market Cross Inn over at Alfriston; there's Mr. Levitt, and Tom Burgess and others besides. . . . There's not a man of 'em dare stir out after dark."

"I wonder!" murmured Sir John musingly. "I wonder!"

"You believe me, sir, I hope?"

"Implicitly, Bob! I do but cast about for a reasonable explanation." And here fell silence again save for the plodding hoof-strokes of their horses, and an occasional gusty sigh from the ex-corporal, who, it seemed, was also busied with his thoughts. It was after a somewhat louder sigh than usual that Sir John addressed him suddenly: "How old are ye, Bob?"

"My age, sir," answered Robert gloomily, "is forty-five, your honour."

"I remember you were a boy when you marched to the wars with my father and Sir Hector."

"Drummer in Sir Hector's regiment, sir."

"And a corporal when he bought you out. You ha' been with me a good many years now, Bob."

"Twenty-two, sir . . . ever since you was a very small boy . . . a lifetime! And during said time, your honour has treated me more like a . . . a friend, sir, than a servant. Consequently I am to-day more your honour's servant than ever. And I'm . . . forty-five, sir!"

"What o' that, Bob? So were you months ago, but it did n't seem to grieve you then."

"Why, d'ye see, sir, the years march on a man at the double, but he never heeds until one day he wakes up to find as he is . . . forty-five!"

"And her name is Ann!" quoth Sir John.

Here, once again, the ex-corporal's immutable calm was gravely threatened; he flushed from shaven chin to neat wig, he blinked and swallowed hard, but when he answered his voice was as steady and unemotional as ever:

"Cor-rect, sir!"

"I'm monstrous glad to hear it, Bob. She hath a slender ankle, a low voice, and is, I hazard, as good as she looks! 'T is high time you thought o' marrying."

At this the ex-corporal stared hard at his horse's ears, from these to the hedges, right and left; finally he spoke:

"Saving your presence, sir, 't is not to be thought of

—not for a moment, your honour. Said young person being scarce turned of twenty years and consequently out o' the question—"

"Have you mentioned the question to her, Bob?"

"No, sir! Nor intend so to do . . . 't would n't be . . . be . . . 't would n't . . . well—'t would n't, sir!"

"Still, I wonder what she would think?"

"Aye, your honour, so do I—vastly! But I don't know . . . never shall know, so—can't say, sir."

Here they fell silent once more, and presently, rounding a bend in the road, the glory of the Downs burst upon them; range upon range of noble hills whose smooth slopes and gentle undulations have in them something sublimely restful, something suggestive of that beneficent quietude, that reposeful, kindly silence which is infinitely greater and better than any speech.

Sir John, having paused awhile to behold this, now set his animal to a trot, when he heard a rattle of wheels behind him and a piping, querulous voice raised in loud complaint:

"Hi—theer! Hey! Caan't 'ee see as oi be a-comin' so faast as oi may? Boide a bit, boide for oi, young man, 'tidn't neighbourly t' roide awaay an' never a word fur nobody nor no one!" And, glancing round, Sir John espied Mr. Dumbrell, that ancient person, perched in a light cart beside Mr. Potter, who drove a very likely looking horse.

"How are you, Mr. Dumbrell? And you, Potter?" inquired Sir John as they came up.

"Middlin' bad, I be!" answered the Ancient One. "Oi be generally-allus ailin', oi be! What wi' that theer ol' bullet in my innards, an' my chacketin' an' barkin', an' me granddarter, an' the axey—'t is gert wonder as oi doan't vade an' wither into my grave, that it be! An' to-day I be mighty cuss an' cluck arl-through-along-on-account-of 'im a-comin' back! Means trouble 'e du—dannel 'im, oi sez!"

"Whom do you mean?"

"'Oo should oi mean 'cept 'im! Soon 's ever 'e comes, along comes trouble, so dannel 'e twoice, I sez."

"Gaffer do mean Lord Sayle, sir," explained Mr. Potter.

"Aye, 'im!" nodded the Ancient One fiercely. "I seen 'im, I did, lookin' so black an' gloomy-glum! 'E be a man as bean't no account no'ow at arl, as I'd up an' tell 'un to 'is 'ead, I would! Ah, an' t' other un 's as bad."

"Who is t' other one?"

"'Oo? Why, 'im fur sure! 'Im as bean't nohow s' good as 'is feäther was afore 'im — that's 'oo, young man."

"'E do mean Sir John Dering, sir," explained Mr. Potter again.

"Ah!" snarled the Ancient One, shaking bony fist. "They be both on 'em come back again to plague the country an' the loikes o' we!"

"Did you happen to see Sir John Dering, Potter?" inquired Sir John.

"No, sir, but they say 'e's back in Sussex at last."

"An' 'ardly a mile awaay be The Acorn!" added the Ancient One; "an' Ed'ard an' 'is mistus' brews good ale! An' I be that tur'ble dry. What wi' me a-chacketin' an' Old Johnny a-tormentin' o' me!"

"Old Johnny?" inquired Sir John.

"Gaffer means the axey, sir," quoth Mr. Potter.

"And pray what is the axey?"

"Don't tell 'im, Jarge!" snarled Mr. Dumbrell. "'E mus' be a barn fule."

"'T is the ager, sir," explained the patient Potter.

"Is your ague indeed so bad, Mr. Dumbrell?"

"Bad?" screeched the old man — "worse 'n bad it be, ah, a sight worse! Nobody never 'ad it so worse as oi, nowhen! Shook arl to liddle bits oi be —"

"Why, then, let us haste to The Acorn forthwith."

Thither they repaired in company, and found it to be a small, yet cheery-looking hedge-tavern set at a bend of the tree-shaded road and presided over by a large and cheery man remarkable for the width of his smile and a

pair of huge, hairy arms; a man who greeted them cheerily and at whom Mr. Potter, in the act of aiding the Ancient One to earth, cocked an eyebrow and lightly caressed his left whisker; whereupon the cheery landlord nodded.

"Aye, aye, Jarge!" quoth he. "Same time, I reckon?"

"Near as mebbe, Ed'ard!" nodded Mr. Potter.

"Wind doo sou'-westerly, Jarge?"

"It be, Ben!" answered Mr. Potter, as they followed the cheery man into a sunny, sand-strewn tap.

"Mr. Dumbrell," said Sir John, "having regard to your ague, may I suggest —"

"Ale!" snapped that Ancient Person. "I never drinks naum but ale, young man, 'cept, p'r'aps a mug o' gumboo now an' then when 't is to be 'ad, but no sperrits for oi!"

The cheery Ed'ard, having attended duly to their several wants, forthwith returned to smile at the road again.

"Talking of spirits," said Sir John as they sat, all four, with their foaming tankards before them, "Ex-Corporal Robert Doubleday here tells me that he saw a ghost the other night —"

"Well, what o' that?" piped the Ancient One. "Theer be 'ostesses o' ghostesses 'ereabouts in Sussex, I rackon. What the rabbits, young man! I du tell 'ee as I've seed ghostesses galore, wi' corps-candles, an' willy-wipsies, aye, an' fairieses afore noo! Wait till I've blowed the fob off 'n my ale, an' I'll tell 'ee."

"Fairieses?" questioned Sir John.

"Some folk do call 'em fairies, sir," explained Mr. Potter.

"Aye, young man," cried Mr. Dumbrell, wiping his mouth, "fairieses — liddle bits o' creeters bigger 'n a squirrel an' not so gert as Mus' Reynolds —"

"'E means a fox, sir," quoth the explanatory Potter, observing Sir John's puzzled look.

"'Old y'r tongue, Jarge, du!" snarled the old man. "Keep y'r mouth shet, Jarge, an' gi'e me a chanct to spik, will 'ee? I be a bit oldish, mebbe, but I bean't nowise doddlish!"

"Not you, Gaffer, not you!" answered Mr. Potter soothingly.

"Well, then, young man," continued Mr. Dumbrell, "dappen ye sh'uld be a-walkin' along-about the four-wents, Wilmington way, arter dark, you 'd see the ghost o' pore Tom Stickley as were shot 'longside o' me whiles we was landin' tubs over tu Cuckmere 'aven, one night thirty year agone an' more! Pore Tom wears a sheet, 'e du, all mucked wi' gore an' gubber . . . though why e' should walk Wilmington way, I dunno."

"But this ghost, Mr. Dumbrell, wore a pair of horns — eh, Bob?"

"Horns, indeed, sirs!" quoth Robert — "horns a yard wide, I'll lay my oath, and all afire!"

"'Orns!" exclaimed the Ancient One scornfully. "I've seed 'em wi' 'orns a-shootin' out sparks an' flame afore now, I 'ave! 'Orns? If ye was to go up-along Windover, aye, or Furrel at midnight — which nobody don't never nowise du — you 'd see more on 'em wi' 'orns than ye could count in a month o' Sundays, aye, that ye would!"

"Allus s'posin' as they 've got the 'sight,' Gaffer!" added Mr. Potter. "Some 'as the gift o' seein' an' some 'as n't!"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Potter?" inquired Sir John.

"Why, sir, I do — an' then again — I doan't. Ye see, sir, it do 'appen as I've never ackcherly seen one, prexactly, as ye might say, but that be because I ain't got the gift o' seein', but I ain't consequently agoin' for to deny the fac'."

"I dunno," quoth the Ancient One thoughtfully — "I dunno as Windover bean't a more likely plaace to see 'em than Furrel, for it were on Windover as pore young 'Obden was done to death, an' the saame wik 'is ghost 'peared tu James Sturton somewheres over by the Long Man an' nigh fritted 'e out o' 'is moind."

"But," said Sir John, "this particular ghost, considering his horns, would seem to be the very devil — "

"Hesh — hesh!" shrilled the Ancient One. "Doan't 'ee

knoaw as 'e are n't to be light-spoke on? 'E doan't like it no'ow! An' if so be as 'e be come fur Mus' Sturton, I dunno as it bean't about toime. An' now my ale be finished an' I bean't agoin' to 'ave no more — an' Jarge bean't neither! And, look 'ee, Mus' Robert," he admonished, wagging bony finger fiercely in the ex-corporal's face, "if ye should hap' t' see my granddarter Ann, doan't 'ee say naun to her about this here liddle drop o' ale, mind, or she 'll be givin' me a middlin' dish o' tongues, I rackon! Come on, Jarge, an' 'elp me inter the cart."

This intricate manœuvre being successfully accomplished, they jogged on together in company; and Sir John noticed that Mr. Potter possessed a sweet though singularly penetrating whistle, and that the tune he rendered, a simple, country air, was always the same. And Sir John further noticed that Mr. Potter whistled only when in the neighbourhood of certain cottages, and also that so soon as they approached these habitations they would behold a man leaning pensively over gate, or in doorway, or busied in the garden, which men, glancing at Mr. Potter, would always behold him in the act of smoothing his neatly trimmed, left side-whisker; whereupon they would nod and flourish hand, fork, mattock or hoe, as the case might be, with a cheery hail of:

"Aye, aye, Jarge!"

At last, reaching a place where the ways divided, Mr. Potter pulled up his horse.

"We be a-goin' round Glynde way, sir," he explained. "If you should hap' along to Alfriston, I 'd be proud to 'ave ye drop in on Potter, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, I certainly will," answered Sir John.

"Aye, an' you too, likewise, Mus' Robert."

"Thank 'ee kindly," answered the corporal; "but I 'd like to ask you, Mr. Dumbrell, ha' you ever known a ghost take harm from a pistol-ball fired point-blank?"

"Never, nowise, nohow!" answered Mr. Dumbrell decidedly, "and because why? Because ghostesses be

moighty ingenurious things, d' ye see, an' can't never be 'urted nowhere an' nowhen!"

"True for you, Gaffer!" quoth Mr. Potter, surveying a soaring lark with an expression of placid and guileless pleasure. "I've 'eerd my grandfeather say as it were n't no manner o' good a-shootin' at a ghost 'cept you 'ad your piece charged wi' a silver bullet, an' even then 't were allus to be expected as your bullet might bounce off the ghost — backwent-like — an' strike ye wi' mortal effec', d' ye see. Good arternoon, sirs!"

"An' mind this," added the Ancient One, bony finger a-wag, "it bean't nowise 'ealthy-loike for no man to go nowheres nohow, nowhere an' nowhen i' the dark 'ereabouts — no!"

Hereupon Mr. Potter touched his horse with the whip and away went that likely animal at such pace that the rattling cart and its occupants were very soon out of sight.

"Ha!" quoth Sir John thoughtfully, as they pursued their way towards High Dering. "Hum! The hunting of spectres would seem to be a highly dangerous sport, Bob."

"Agreed, sir!"

"And yet — notwithstanding — I think, yes — I think we will adventure it one of these nights, Bob."

"Very good, sir!" answered Robert the imperturbable.

Reaching Dering Village at last, an unpleasant surprise awaited them; for no sooner had Sir John dismounted before the Dering Arms than he was confronted by four stalwart men, formidable fellows armed with sticks and clad in a neat livery who, stepping out of the inn, stood grouped in the doorway, barring his entrance.

"Well, my lads," inquired Sir John, chin uplifted, "what is it?"

"Ask 'im," answered one insolently, a surly, blue-jowled fellow, with a back-handed gesture towards the woeful landlord who stood shrinking in the background.

"Be good enough to explain, Mr. Nixon."

"Why, ye see, sirs," mumbled the landlord, "these be Mus' Sturton's men, an' this be Dering, an' Mus' Sturton's word is as you must go."

"You mean that we are to be turned out?"

"Mus' Sturton says as you must go, sirs," repeated the landlord miserably.

"Pray, what livery do these men wear?"

"Why, sir, it be the Dering livery, though they be straangers 'ereabouts—"

"Ha!" murmured Sir John, "I thought I recognized it. And we are to go, are we?"

"An' the sooner the better!" growled the blue-jowled man truculently; here ex-Corporal Robert, leaving the horses to stand, made preparations for instant action but paused in grim surprise, for Sir John was laughing in sheer, unalloyed delight.

"You hear, Bob, you hear?" he gasped. "Come, let us go."

"Go, sir!" exclaimed the corporal. "Go!"

"At once, Bob. So get our valises and effects—I see Mr. Nixon has 'em all ready for us—and let us begone."

"But—but . . . go, is it?" stammered the corporal, clenching his fists.

"Aye, Bob. Don't you see we are driven forth of Sir John Dering's inn on Sir John Dering's land by men wearing Sir John Dering's livery and acting under instructions of Sir John Dering's steward! It is all quite delightfully grotesque! So get our things, Bob, nor seek to ruin so exquisite a situation by violence; let us rather steal humbly away. We will try Alfriston, Bob."

"Aye, sir!" sighed the corporal. "But, sir, such meekness, such—horrible meekness, your honour—"

"What of it, Bob?"

"'T is so imprece-dented sir, as to be almost beyond natur', your honour."

Laughing, Sir John remounted and, laughing still, rode off to seek him a new lodging.

## CHAPTER XXII

### My Lady Herminia Barrasdaile Weaves Webs for an Unwary He

"Aunt," cried my lady, tossing Mr. Steele's *Tatler* to the other end of the cushioned settee and yawning prodigiously, "Aunt Lucinda, 't is high time I had you married again!"

"What, wench, what?" exclaimed the diminutive Duchess, opening drowsy eyes. "Married, d' ye say?"

"So soon as possible, dear aunt. I intend to wed you to a —"

"Heavens, Herminia, how harrowing — how hateful —"

"Goodness gracious preserve us, aunt, how can ye?"

"Gemini! What now, child?"

"Smother one with alliterations."

"Tush, miss," exclaimed the Duchess, "and you talk such pure folly so excessively extreme! Marriage, indeed! At my age!"

"Aye, indeed, aunt! 'T is high time I had thee safe wedded, for, though so small, thou 'rt a monstrous responsibility, my dear soul. So I ha' found thee a spouse —"

"La, miss, hush and fie! I protest you make me blush."

"A monster, aunt!"

"Horrors, child!"

"Who could lift thee in one vast fist, thou dainty atomy . . . aye, and big me in t' other, for that matter! A giant, aunt!"

"Herminia, you rave! What do I want with your monstrous giants!"

"But he is a kindly monster, aunt, a most gentle giant. And he is, besides, a baronet, a soldier, a gentleman o' birth and breeding, not ill-looking, nor old . . . not very, brave as a lion, vigorous with health, strong as Sam-

son. . . . Doth not all this make thee to be a little in love with him?"

"Peace, child — cease, miss! You talk like a mad thing!"

"So thou shalt come and look him over for thyself, dearest aunt."

"I won't!"

"You will!"

"But I don't desire to view any monsters, gentle or no."

"Aye, but then — I do, aunt! And so the matter is finally settled!" said my lady, with determined nod.

"Goodness aid!" ejaculated the Duchess. "What 's settled, Herminia?"

"We start as soon as possible."

"Where for?"

"Sussex."

"I'll not go!"

"O aunt, thou dearest of small creatures . . . thou wilt not, thou canst not desert thy doting, solitary niece. For, indeed, go I must."

"Why, Herminia, child? Why, a heaven's name?"

"To — to fulfil my destiny, aunt."

"Herminia, be sane! Tell me what you mean by 'your destiny'!"

"To fill his pipe and light it, aunt. To bring his slippers. To cook for the pure joy of watching him eat. To perform those humble, lowly, feminine duties small in themselves yet that, in the sum, make for the glory of true womanhood and lift her nigh the angels. . . . Thus it went somewhat, the rest I ha' forgot."

"Pipe?" murmured the bewildered Duchess. "Slippers? Whose?"

"Thy monster's, aunt."

"Herminia, my poor child! Thou 'rt distraught — 't is the sun to-day —"

"Nay, aunt, 't was Sir John Dering, weeks ago."

"Ha!" exclaimed the little Duchess loudly, and sitting up with sudden new interest. "What of the dear man?"

"'Dear man,' indeed!" repeated my lady, clenching white hands and stamping both feet at once. "What of him? Oh, the devil confound him!" Here my lady's deep bosom surged tempestuously, her eyes glowed, her delicate nostrils dilated; in fine, she manifested all those symptoms of unruly anger that may be vented only by your very great lady high above the vulgar herd, or your slatternly virago very far below. All of which the Duchess, wise in most things pertaining to her own sex, noted with her keen, shrewd eyes.

"My poor Herminia!" she sighed. "How long have ye been in love with him?"

"Love?" gasped my lady. "In love? . . . Listen, aunt; I feel for him such unutterable deeps of bitter scorn, such unspeakable loathing, such a world o' detestation that I yearn to have him truly in love with me."

"Why, to be sure, child!" nodded the Duchess. "Most feminine, under the circumstances!"

"Aunt, could I but once see him truly serious! Could I but once shake his hateful calm, his cold, passionless self-assurance . . . oh, then!"

"What then, Herminia?" At this direct question, my lady looked a trifle blank, whereupon the Duchess answered for her: "Why then, child, you would make of his passion a mock, to be sure, trample his humble love under your proud hoofs — I mean feet — laugh his suit to scorn — "

"Can you doubt it, aunt?"

"Never for one moment, my sweet."

"He should learn at last the deep measure of a woman's scorn, aunt!"

"Yes, my love. And then?"

"Then, aunt, why . . . I should at least be satisfied."

"I wonder, child! . . . So here is why you will to Sussex?"

"And to find thee a husband, aunt."

"Tush for that, thou sly minx! But to watch thee weaving webs for an unwary he, casting thy spells, luring

the poor wretch to distraction and destruction. . . . Hum!"

"Then we'll start at the earliest moment, dear aunt. Let it be thought we are for your house in Surrey or Kent — or anywhere you will. But once in Sussex we must forget your rank; you must be a superior inferior person, aunt, or better — a decayed gentlewoman."

"Horrors — no, Herminia! I refuse to be anything so infinite abhorrent. Lud! I should sound like a corpse!"

"Howbeit thou wilt always be my little, loved, clever aunt!"

"But think, Herminia! What will the world say?"

"Everything that is sayable, aunt, but what matter?"

"But where must we live, Herminia?"

"In some small house or cottage suitable to our humble circumstances, sure."

"And how are we to find such place? And how if no such place is to be had, child?"

"Fie, aunt! Remember thou 'rt a duchess and can do anything! You have hosts of servants, mostly idle! There is old Hammond, your head courier, reliable and trustworthy; let this be his duty. . . . A cottage in or near Alfriston. . . . 'Faith, shalt write to him at once!"

So, after due consideration, the Duchess sat down to write forthwith, while my lady hurried away, busied with a thousand concerns; and presently to the Duchess came Mrs. Betty in exclamatory excitement:

"O mam, your Grace, and is 't true indeed that we be a-leaving town, my lady?"

"Yes, Betty. I am taking your lady away to get her married."

"Married, mem? Lord save us all alive . . . my lady — married? O my lady — who to?"

"To the one man I have seen who may govern her."

"Oh, gracious goodness me, my lady! And who can ever that be, your ladyship, pray?"

"One who, I think, may teach her happiness."

"Yes, your Grace, but O my lady — who?"

"A man, Betty."

"Yes, my lady, I guessed as much, mem, but —"

"A man she is head over ears in love with already, poor child!"

"My lady — in love, mem! And never told me! O mem! Oh, goodness gracious alive. . . . O your Grace — who?"

"Don't be inquisitive, Mrs. Betty! There, run away, child!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### How George Potter Circumvented the Preventives

Since that dim, far-distant day when pious hands first raised Alfriston Cross, it has endured much by stress of weather and the passing of so very many years. In its shadow may have stood Godwyn the great Jarl, and his feoffman Aelfric; about it lusty Saxon ceorls bartered and trafficked; past it may have reeled some of the bloody wrack of Harold's army, desperate men weary from the fatal strife at Senlac. Here has it stood through the centuries, lashed by rain and wind, or drowsing in the sun, while England waxed great and powerful. And as it doubtless was once the place where Aelfric's ceorls and villeins bartered and chatted, so has it been a familiar spot for lounging confabulation ever since, and has propped the backs of "all sorts and conditions of men" through countless generations.

And of all this untold host surely never was there a back so suggestive of conscious innocence, of gently-assertive rectitude and of guileful guilelessness as the broad back of Mr. George Potter as he leaned there this summer's eve in murmurous, monosyllabic converse with Master Tom Pursglove, the Tanner.

"Could n't nowise be no better, Jarge!" remarked Mr. Pursglove.

"Nohow!" responded Mr. Potter, his limpid gaze upon a gathering bank of clouds to windward.

"Black daark 't will be, Jarge, an' a risin' wind t' kiver the tramp o' the ponies' 'ooves."

"Aye!"

"Yonder comes Godby at last, an' along wi' Joe Muddle, Jarge."

"I sees 'em."

"They 'll 'ave been round givin' 'the word,' I reckon?"

"They 'ave, Tom."

Here Messrs. Godby and Muddle sauntered up and presently there were four stalwart backs against the old cross.

"What be the tale, lads?" inquired Mr. Potter.

"Fourteen, Jarge!" quoth Mr. Godby, cutting a quid of tobacco.

"'Leven!" said Mr. Muddle, tapping a large, horn snuff-box.

"Which du mak' thirty-seven on us, all told!" added Mr. Pursglove, snuffing with Mr. Muddle.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Potter; and so fell a ruminative silence.

"Fine night, Jarge, 't will be?" opined Mr. Muddle at last.

"Sh'uld n't wonder, Joe!" admitted Mr. Potter.

"But I do 'ear as the coastguard be doubled!" quoth Mr. Godby.

"True, John!" nodded Mr. Potter. "They be! Likewise the bozzlers be out!"

"An' Will Comfort tol' me as 'e seen sojers, a-marching out o' Brighthelmstone 's marnin', Jarge," said Mr. Muddle.

"Let 'em march!" murmured Mr. Potter.

"Ah," quoth Mr. Pursglove, "Jarge 'll sarcumwent 'em some'ow, same as 'e done afore . . . 't was tubs 'arf-full o' watter, buoyed very keerful off Burling Gap, las' time . . . coastguard a-haulin' of 'em in, tur'ble busy, an' us a-runnin' the stuff at Cuckmere! Sarcumwentin 's the word. What d' you say, Jarge?"

"'Ogs," quoth Mr. Potter in somewhat louder tone, his mild gaze still uplift heavenward, "'ogs, Tom, takes as much knowin' as an 'ooman — 'specially sows! There was Peter Bunkle's gert sow, you 'll mind, as never littered less 'n eleven, suddenly took it into 'er 'ead to starve — would n't eat naun. Peter, 'e done arl as ever man could for 'er, but 't were n't no manner o' good. Me an' Peter 'ticed an' cogged 'er wi' arl kinds o' fother from rum-an'-

milk, loo'-warm, to some stuff in a bottle as Peter 'ad from the 'poth'cary the time 'is leg was s' bad, but she 'd 'ave naun, not she — turned up 'er nose, 'er did, an' being just as contrairy as any 'ooman, closed 'er eyes an' went an' died. The neighbours arl guv' it their 'pinion as she was took off by a information, but I b'liv' as she was a-grizzlin' over summat as nobody knowed nothin' about 'cept 'er own self, d' ye see? Good evenin', Mus' Sturton, sir, 'ere be Potter a-tellin' 'bout Peter Bunkle's sow an' 'ere be you — a-bobbin' up that onexpected-like — "

"Look ye here, George Potter," cried Mr. Sturton in his peremptory fashion, big chin out-thrust; "look now, and mark me — "

"Potter be a-lookin', sir! An' — talkin' o' marks, 'ow 's your pore eye now, Mr. Sturton, sir?"

It was during Mr. Sturton's rejoinder, a long and eloquent denunciation of Mr. Potter, ending with a comprehensive condemnation of his eyes, limbs, lights, body and soul, that Sir John rode into the village, the gloomy Robert at his heels, and unnoticed by any one, pulled up in the shade of a tree whose wide-spreading branches afforded a pleasing and kindly shade.

"Lord, Mus' Sturton, sir," quoth Mr. Potter, "'eavens know as I doan't begridge nobody nothing, but I 'd gi'e summat for your gift o' speech . . . so easy-like . . . sech curses! So 'eart-felt — "

"I 'll see ye hung or transported yet for the rogue y' are, George Potter!"

"I 'opes not, sir — "

"Hold y'r tongue!"

"Don't be 'arsh, Mr. Sturton, sir — "

"We know ye for a poachin', smugglin' rascal — "

"Poachin'? Smugglin'? . . . Wot — me?" quoth Mr. Potter in tones of pained surprise. "Mus' Sturton, if ever you catches Potter a-doin' one or t' other, I 'opes as you 'll mak' an' example of 'im."

"That 's what we 're here for — look behind ye!" cried Mr. Sturton triumphantly. "Are ye there, Oxham?"

"All ready, Sturton!" boomed a jovial voice, and out from an adjacent twitten stepped five brawny fellows headed by a large, loud man who bore himself with a jaunty truculence and wore his three-cornered hat cocked at a defiant angle. At sight of whom, Sir John frowned slightly: beholding which portent the corporal's gloom was lifted from him, and, freeing his feet from the stirrups, he prepared for action sudden and swift.

"Why, good-evening, Mus' Oxham!" said Mr. Potter serenely. "An' 'ow might Lord Sayle be a-gettin' along wi' his wounded arm?"

Mr. Oxham slapped coat-skirts with his riding-whip and smiled unpleasantly.

"Well an' hearty enough to attend to you, I reckon," he answered. "So are ye a-coming along with us quiet or no?"

"But — wheer to, sir?"

"To my Lord Sayle, for sure!"

"On what account, sir?"

"Poaching!" cried Mr. Sturton. "Poaching in the first place, and smuggling in the second and for being an insolent, shiftless, masterless rogue in the third — "

"And in the fourth place," smiled Mr. Oxham, seeming bigger and louder than ever, "because my lord wants ye! An' that 's enough, I reckon!"

"Aye," nodded Mr. Potter, "an' where be your warrant, sir?"

"Never you trouble for that, Potter! My lord wants ye. Are ye comin' quiet or no?"

"But this bean't no kind o' justice, sirs — "

"Never you trouble about justice, Potter. You can talk o' that to his lordship. Now, are ye comin' quiet or no?"

"Quiet!" answered Mr. Potter; "but you 'll be s' kind as to allow me a drink o' ale, first?"

"Not by no manner o' means!" smiled Mr. Oxham, planting himself before his captive. "You are comin' along with us, and you 're a-comin' — now!"

"I think not!" said a somewhat high, resonant voice,

and, riding from behind the tree, Sir John reined in his horse and sat looking at the group, his chin tilted imperiously, his eyes quick and keen.

"And who," demanded the large Mr. Oxham, smiling and slapping coat-skirts again — "who the devil are you?"

"Nobody, Oxham!" answered Mr. Sturton. "A no-account youngster as I've turned out o' The Dering Arms . . . knocked him into the dik', I did, last time we met — "

"And my name is Derwent!" added Sir John. "And I will not suffer you to drag this man away — now or at any other time."

Mr. Oxham boomed derisive laughter and flourished his whip for the benefit of the gathering crowd that pressed ever nearer.

"Oh . . . you won't, hey?" he demanded.

"No," answered Sir John. "And — look 'ee, fellow, next time you desire to laugh, turn away — your gaping mouth offends me!"

"Why — why, damme!" stammered Mr. Oxham, staring. "Offend you, is it? Ecod, I'll do more than offend ye if ye doan't tak' yourself off, and sharp 's the word!"

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir John. "The vulgar rogue actually dares to threaten!"

"Do ye tak' yourself out o' my way or doan't ye?" shouted Mr. Oxham, brandishing his whip.

"I do not!" answered Sir John, and with a motion of slender hands, lifted the flaps of his holsters, discovering the butts of two serviceable pistols at his saddle.

"Ho — murder, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Oxham, falling back a step.

"Bob, should it be necessary, you will leave the shooting to me."

"I prefer my riding-crop, sir!" answered the Corporal happily.

"And now," continued Sir John, his eyes very quick and watchful, "Mr. Oxham, Mr. Sturton and gentlemen

all, listen to me! I will not permit Mr. Potter to be apprehended in this outrageous fashion for the following cogent and excellent reasons, namely: first, because 't is against the law; second, because I myself share Mr. Potter's very natural aversion to my Lord Sayle's company; and, thirdly, because I regard Mr. Potter in the light of a friend and, as a Man o' Sentiment, I feel the bonds of friendship very sacred. . . . How say ye, gentlemen?"

"You 'm right, sir! Right you be!" cried a voice.

"Indeed, we are all with you!" added a second voice, and Mr. Pym, the painter, appeared, hatless and with a long-hafted prawning-net in his hand. "The man Sayle has tyrannised hereabouts too long!"

"Aye, that 'e 'ave! That 'e 'ave!" cried others, and the crowd surged nearer with an angry muttering, insomuch that Mr. Oxham flourished his whip and scowled, while his satellites, for all their brawn, began to grow uneasy.

"At him, Oxham!" cried Mr. Sturton. "Pull him from his horse; he won't dare to shoot!"

"Try!" quoth Sir John.

"Aye, come on, if ye will!" added Mr. Pym, brandishing his heavy-hafted net.

Here was a moment's silence, and then Mr. Potter spoke:

"Thank ye heartily, friends an' neighbours — and you most of arl, Mus' Derwent, sir, but it bean't no manner o' good a-muckin' yourself up arl-along-on-account-of poor Potter's affairs, not nohow. There bean't no man can't nowise help poor Potter except Potter himself, I rackon, and, sir — Potter be agoin' to try!"

As he uttered the last word Mr. Potter leapt, brawny fist a-swing with behind it all the weight, strength and impetus of powerful body; and, felled by that resistless blow, the large Mr. Oxham, for all his size, rolled helpless upon the roadway, while over his prostrate form leapt the fugitive and disappeared through the open doorway of

The Market Cross Inn but with Sturton and divers other of Oxham's men close upon his heels.

Next instant Sir John had plucked forth his pistols, dismounted and, entering the inn, beheld Sturton and his fellows staring around them and upon each other in speechless, wondering dismay, for save for themselves the place was empty; Mr. Potter, it seemed, had vanished into thin air.

It was a proportionate, fair-sized room with sanded floor, beamed ceiling and a wide hearth, where burned a cheery fire screened by a huge, high-backed settle.

"Muster Sturton, sir," quoth one man, glancing uneasily about, "I don't like this, blind me if I do! . . . A man as wanishes afore a man's werry eyes ain't nat'ral, an' I don't loike it."

"No more don't I!" added a second. "One moment theer 'e was, plain to see, the next 'e ducks be'ind the settle yonder — you seen 'im duck, sir — an' then . . . well . . . 'e ain't!"

"Hold y'r tongues!" boomed Mr. Oxham, striding forward at this juncture, cherishing bruised face with one hand, whip brandished in the other. "You, Sturton, where is he? What 's come o' the rogue?"

"Aye — what?" answered Sturton, his gaze wandering. "I was close on him when he slipped behind this here settle, and then — well, he ain't here now, Oxham! And I swear he never reached door!"

"But, damme," roared Mr. Oxham, fetching the settle a resounding blow with his whip, "he must be 'ereabouts somewhere, man!"

"Aye, but — where?"

"Skulking in some hole or corner — "

"Why, then — find him, Oxham!"

Hereupon Mr. Oxham roared for Peter Bunkle, the landlord; and after some while Mr. Bunkle condescended to become visible, a shortish, broad-shouldered man whose sturdy middle was swathed in snowy apron and whose eyes were round and wide with innocent inquiry; to whom

Mr. Oxham, with much whip-flourishing, set forth the tale of Mr. Potter's so sudden disappearance, demanding instant elucidation thereof under pain of dire penalties to all and sundry.

"What, Jarge Potter vanished again, says you?" inquired Mr. Bunkle, faintly interested. "Well, wot o' that — Lord, is this arl? Why, folks be allus a-disappearin' 'ereabouts — specially Jarge Potter; it do be gettin' quite an 'abit wi' him. But, bless ye, doan't ye go a-worryin' — Jarge 'll come back safe an' sound, 'e allus do — if ye wait long enough."

"Now you, Bunkle, look 'ee here!" boomed Mr. Oxham, whip a-flourish. "We know as there 's a cargo to be run to-night somewheres — "

"Cargo?" repeated Mr. Bunkle, vastly astonished. "Oh? What of? Run where?"

"You know that well enough, Bunkle, but no matter! We want Potter. Lord Sayle knows 'e be one o' the ringleaders, and he 's sent us to tak' him, and tak' him we will."

"Well, then, tak' him," nodded Mr. Bunkle, "an' I 'll get back to my cookin' — as fine a jugged-'are — "

"Where is he? Speak up!"

"Who?"

"Who? Why, Potter, damme!"

"Lord, bean't ye a-tellin' me as he be vanished, an' if he be vanished, I suppose vanished 'e be — "

"Where to, dang ye — where?"

"'Ow should I know?" sighed Mr. Bunkle. "An' that theer jugged-'are nigh ready to be dished — 'ow should any one know? Arl as I do know is as theer be strange 'appenings 'ereabouts, aye, that there be; country 's full o' arl manner o' unnat'ralness — visions, spekiters — Mus' Sturton seen a phanitum only t' other night did n't ye, Mus' Sturton?"

"Who says so — lies!" cried Mr. Sturton fiercely. "And, Oxham, if ye hope to find Potter you 'd best search now 'stead o' wasting any more time."

"Aye, search be the word!" nodded Mr. Bunkle. "I can show ye arl manner o' likely places to search in—"

"I'll find the curst rogue if we ha' to pull the danged place about your ears—"

"Why, very good!" answered Mr. Bunkle, rubbing his hands. "Only arl breakages must be paid for—"

"Paid for?" roared Mr. Oxham, louder than ever. "Gimme any more o' your imperence an' I'll pay ye wi' my whip!"

"I shouldn't!" answered Mr. Bunkle. "No, I shouldn't if I was you, Oxham."

For answer Mr. Oxham raised his whip, only to have it twitched out of his grasp from behind, and, wheeling about, came face to face with the imperturbable Robert.

"You . . . you . . ." he panted. "Gimme that whip!"

"With j'y!" answered the ex-corporal, stepping back for space to strike.

"I suggest the fire, Robert!" murmured Sir John from where he lolled upon the settle; and next moment Mr. Oxham's whip was among the flames, and before its stupefied owner could find words, Sir John continued:

"And now, Mr. Oxham, you may depart and do your expected bellowing elsewhere. I find you altogether offensive! . . . D' ye hear me, fellow—go!"

Mr. Oxham's large face grew inflamed and seemed to swell larger, and he glared from the indolent figure on the settle to his five uneasy stalwarts, but hard by, the corporal and Mr. Bunkle stood poised for action offensive; in the doorway, Mr. Pym leaned upon his prawning-net, and behind him loomed Messrs. Pursglove and Muddle, while divers faces scowled in at the open lattice. Observing all of which, Mr. Sturton spoke:

"We'd best be going, Oxham. We'll see no more o' Potter to-night, I reckon, leastways—not hereabouts. We'd best be going—"

"Go?" roared Oxham. "Not yet, damme!" And, speaking, drew a pistol from his pocket, but, in that mo-

ment, down came Mr. Pym's unerring prawning-net, completely enveloping his head, and thus securely netted he was deftly disarmed by Mr. Bunkle, who, levelling the weapon at the gloomy five, commanded them to begone; which order they promptly obeyed, followed by Sturton and lastly by Mr. Oxham, hustled ignominiously into the street, his head still enveloped in the net, to be greeted by the laughter of all Alfriston, as it seemed.

"We have raised the devil, I fear," said Mr. Pym, as the hooting and laughter died away. "We shall have Lord Sayle down on us for this, which is bad, and I have lost a very good net — which is worse!"

"But egad, sir," laughed Sir John, "sure never was net lost to better purpose! You 'll stay to crack a bottle, I hope? You 'll do me the honour, sir?"

"Thank 'ee, no, Mr. Derwent. I must be up and away early to-morrow."

"To paint, sir?"

"To prawn!" answered the painter, his eyes twinkling. "An occupation less lofty, mayhap, but equally absorbing, and often bringing more ultimate comfort and satisfaction."

"But, sir — surely a picture — "

"May be good or bad," sighed the painter, "but a prawn is ever and always — a prawn! Have ye ever tried 'em — fresh boiled . . . warm from the pot, sir?"

"Never!"

"Ah," quoth Mr. Pym, "there is, sir, to your man of delicate perception and fine sentiment, in the strains of music, the glory of dawn, the glow of sunset, the chaste beauty of evening, there is, I say, a tender glamour, a joy inexpressible, but . . . prawns . . . warm from the pot may reach the soul just as surely though by a different avenue. Perchance to-morrow you may learn this — if you will?"

So saying, the painter laughed suddenly, shook hands and strode away.

"And now, sirs," sighed Mr. Bunkle, carefully uncock-

ing Mr. Oxham's pistol, "mindin' that theer jugged-'are o' mine as ha' been a-juggin' of itself a sight too long, if you 'll gimme your orders an' lemme go, I 'll be obleeged."

"Can you give us accommodation here, Mr. Bunkle?"

"Why, sir, that arl depends on how much, whatlike and when?"

"Two rooms. Now."

"Was you a-thinkin' o' stayin' 'ere, sirs? For long?"

"Some weeks."

"Think o' that, now! Dunno as oi bean't that upset to tell you as arl my rooms be took, sir. But theer be The Star down the street, comfortable and very 'ome-like—"

"Then you won't take us, Mr. Bunkle?"

"Caan't, sir! It bean't nowise possible nohow or—" Mr. Bunkle paused suddenly, for in the circumambient air was a dull yet persistent knocking, a noise very difficult to locate, that seemed now overhead, now underfoot, now behind the walls; hearkening to which elusive sound, Mr. Bunkle's eye grew dreamy, he stroked his clean-shaven chin, he smoothed his neat apron and, the knocks having subsided, coughed and spoke:

"Two rooms, oi think you said, sir? Only two?"

"Two, Mr. Bunkle."

"Why, then, if two 'll be enough, I think . . . p'r'aps . . . maybe we might . . . manage it."

Here three raps louder than before.

"Yes . . . I be purty sure we can, sir."

Here two raps.

"We will, sir."

Here a single sharp rap and silence.

"Mr. Bunkle," said Sir John, smiling, "we thank you, and I can promise that you will find us very quiet lodgers — full of sympathy and understanding."

"Why, then, gen'elmen, if ye 'll trouble to step this way, my mist'us will show ye your rooms."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### Of Mr. Bunkle and the Room with Five Doors

Ten o'clock was striking, and the old Cross, deserted and solitary, looked down upon a silent village; and Sir John Dering, leaning out from his open lattice, looked down upon the old Cross. Alfriston slept, and had done so for an hour or more apparently, like the highly decorous community it was; not a foot-fall disturbed its chaste silence, not a light glimmered anywhere.

A mournful wind moaned in fitful gusts, the sign-board of The Star, farther down the street, creaked dismally, but, save for this, all was brooding peace and reposeful silence.

But presently Sir John's quick ear distinguished a sound not of the wind, though like the wind fitful — a faint throb of galloping hoofs, now lost, now heard again, growing ever louder; on they came, nearer and nearer, until the dark street rang and echoed, but never a door opened, never a light blinked, not even when they slowed to a trot, to an amble, to a walk, and finally stopped outside the inn of the Market Cross; Alfriston slept on serenely persistent.

The moon, though obscured by a flying scud, yet gave sufficient light to disclose the shape of horse and rider looming gigantic in the dimness. Ensued the creak of saddle and stamp of heavy foot as the horseman alighted, and thereafter a knocking soft but imperative.

"Bunkle!" quoth a voice — "Peter Bunkle! Are ye there, Peter man?" From somewhere adjacent Mr. Bunkle answered, his voice sounding remarkably wide awake:

"Be that y'rself, sir?"

"Aye. Are the lads by, yet?"

"Not yet, sir. But I doan't expect 'em for another 'arf-hour. Be aught wrong, sir?"

"Soldiers."

"Wheer away?"

"Lyin' ambushed over by Exeat, an' there's more of 'em 't wixt here and Frogfirle. I tell ye the country's thick with 'em. . . . I was stopped twice. . . . There'll be bloody murder ere dawn, Peter man!"

"Why, sir, Jarge Potter knows, an' Jarge aren't nowise to be caught nappin' nohow. 'E'll send the lads cross-country wi' the stuff, I rackon, an' lead they sojers a foine dance. . . . Bide a moment an' I'll let ye in." Here, after brief delay, the sound of opening door, a heavy tread, a squeak of bolts and silence again, except for moaning wind and the snort of the horse below.

Then Sir John closed his lattice, and, taking up the candle, stood awhile lost in thought; finally he stepped from his chamber, closing the door behind him, and descended the stair, to find himself in a crooked passage full of dim nooks, odd corners and unexpected levels. Presently, guided by a murmur of voices, he espied a small door coyly hidden in most unlikely corner, and, lifting the latch, beheld a small, strangely shaped apartment further remarkable in that it possessed two windows and five doors; and here, in an elbow-chair before a smouldering fire, lolled the gigantic form of Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean. His riding-coat was dusty like his long, booted legs outstretched upon the hearth, his unkempt periwig excessively askew; in one hand he held his cherished clay pipe, in the other a steaming glass that gave forth a delectable fragrance, while Mr. Bunkle busied himself at the table with a bowl and ladle.

At the sudden opening of the door, both men glanced up, and Sir Hector rose hastily.

"John!" he exclaimed.

Sir John bowed in his stateliest fashion, and so they confronted each other, Sir Hector flushed of cheek and frowning a little as one at a loss; Mr. Bunkle, suspending his operations, looked from one to the other and, with instinctive delicacy, opened the nearest of the five doors

and incontinent vanished. Sir Hector set down his glass and drew himself to his extremest height so that the curls of his peruke brushed the carven beam above.

"Sir John Dering!"

Sir John's bow was entirely formal, whereupon Sir Hector puffed furiously at his pipe, but, finding it was out, laid it very carefully beside his glass and scowled blacker than ever.

"Sir John," quoth he in his most precise English, "on the last occasion we had speech I felt constrained to tell you that you — lied!"

"Alas, yes!" sighed Sir John.

"And I named you liar because circumstances and your very evil reputation seemed more than to warrant it."

"Perchance they did, sir," murmured Sir John.

"Under the which circumstances, I was bound to draw upon you," continued Sir Hector ponderously, "and you, sir, refused to fight, and stomached the insult. Well, sir, are you suffering from an indigestion? Have you thought better of your refusal?"

"I have!" answered Sir John. "Better and better."

"Why, then, sir," answered Sir Hector, reaching his long Andrea Ferrara from adjacent corner, "there will be plenty of space for us in the tap-room —"

"But your arm, sir?" demurred Sir John.

"Tush — 't is well! Besides, 't was my left. But where is your sword?"

"Upstairs, sir, where it will surely remain," answered Sir John, and smiled. And, meeting this smile, Sir Hector loosed his great weapon very suddenly, much as if it had burned his fingers.

"Johnny — Sir John," he stammered, "what d' ye mean? Why are you here?"

"Surely, Hector, oh, surely you can guess — you that were my father's comrade and my best friend?"

Sir Hector turned to stare down into the fire, and when next he spoke, voice and manner were wholly changed.

"Sir John . . . John . . . O Johnnie lad . . . is it

forget an' forgi'e ye mean . . . for auld lang syne? Can ye forgi'e so deadly an insult? Na — na, lad, bide a wee! . . . Mebbe I was o'er hasty wi' ye . . . mebbe I was no' juist mysel' . . . mebbe — oh, my certie, I was a muckle fule. . . . So, John — Johnny man, if — "

"Why, Hector," exclaimed Sir John, setting down the candle rather hastily, "'t is all forgotten long since and . . . and . . . i' faith, Hector, but your wig is most damnably askew! Stand still and let me straighten it for thee!"

And so Sir John reached up and resettled Sir Hector's peruke as he had been wont to do as a boy coaxing forgiveness for some fault, or as a youth soothing the anger of a none too stern guardian; and somehow Sir Hector's great arm, as it had ever done on such occasions, crept about Sir John's shoulders and rested there.

"John," quoth he, "I 'm gettin' auld . . . and age, lad, is aye solitary. . . . We maun quarrel nae mair, Johnnie!"

"Never again, Hector."

"Forbye, there 's nae wumman worth it — no, not one in a' this warld, lad . . . much less yon besom! An' I gave ye the lie, John — you as ne'er leed tae me in a' y'r days. . . . I tak' it back — I withdraw it, John, every word, here and now. I did ye wrang, Johnnie, I did ye muckle wrang an' a' by reason o' yon feckless wench! I 'm glad she ran awa' . . . though I 'll no deny I 've been a wee lonesome o' late! Ah well, come lad, we 'll tak' a glass an' forget it — a wee drappie o' Bunkle's gumboo whilk is a concoction ye 'll no' find in ony place but in Sussex, an' worthy sic' a sweet country. Ye 'll drink wi' me, John?"

"With all my heart, Hector! But pray remember that my name is still Derwent."

Sir Hector nodded and rapped gently on the panelling, at which summons one of the five doors opened and Mr. Bunkle reappeared, though from a totally opposite point of the compass; but scarcely had he, smiling and

deft, fulfilled Sir Hector's order and Sir John raised the fragrant beverage to his lips, than yet another door was softly unlatched and Robert, the Imperturbable, halted upon the threshold.

"Sirs," said he, favouring them with that movement that was neither salute nor bow and yet something of both, "think it proper to report sounds of distant musketry."

"Musketry, Robbie?" exclaimed Sir Hector. "Musketry, d' ye say?"

"The same, sir!"

"Did I no' tell ye, Peter man, did I no' tell ye? There 's murder afoot! And a' by reason o' that de'il Sayle, damn him!"

Silently Mr. Bunkle led the way into his unlighted taproom and, opening the wide lattice, they stood there in the dark, hearkening with straining ears; and presently, borne upon the wind from afar came the faint report of fire-arms, four or five shots in rapid succession.

"That 'll be 't wixt here an' Exeat, I rackon," quoth Mr. Bunkle.

"O man!" cried Sir Hector bitterly, "is it no' a fearfu' thocht that Sussex lads — aye, neighbours belike, may be murderin' each ither?"

"Why, sir," answered Mr. Bunkle, "it be only the sojers, d' ye see —"

"The soldiers!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "and 't is Sayle hath brought 'em! Look 'ee, John, hitherto all men, coast guard, preventive and trader, being Sussex men, have lived together like brothers — which, according to 'The Word' is a verra desirable an' blessed thing, y' ken, John — not that I haud wi' the nee-farious traffic, mind ye, but . . . but . . . aweel, damn Sayle, onyway!"

"'Eartily, sir! But never worrit," admonished Mr. Bunkle philosophically, "arter arl it be only sojers a-shootin' in the dark . . . an' even roses 'as thorns, sir, and —" Here Mr. Bunkle paused as more shots rang out.

"Tae the de'il wi' y'r thorrns, man!" cried Sir Hector, "yon was much nearer."

"Why, so it were, sir," Mr. Bunkle admitted; "but they be only shootin' at Jarge Potter, I do 'ope —"

"Hope, man, d' ye say hope?" questioned Sir Hector fiercely.

"Aye, sir, ye see whiles they sojers was a-laying in wait for Jarge, Jarge were a-layin' in wait for they wi' ponies an' tubs arl complete an' 'arf a dozen stout lads. Well, sirs, s' soon as they sojers spy Jarge, away Jarge goes, though not too fast, an' they sojers arter 'im. Jarge do know every yard o' the country 'ereabouts, ah, blindfold 'e do — an' leads they sojers up an' down an' 'ere an' there by the 'ardest ways 'till, being a-top of an 'ill, Jarge gi'es the word, the lads unloose a tub an' away goes that theer tub a-rollin' an' a-boundin' down a-top o' they sojers, d' ye see, an' away goes Jarge again in the dark 'till 'e feels like lettin' they sojers 'ave another 'un an' another 'till arl 'is tubs be gone . . . an' then gallop it is an' away goes Jarge, leavin' they sojers wi' naun to show for their 'ard labour 'cept mud an' gubber an' bruises, d' ye see!"

"Ah — but the tubs, Peter man, they hae the tubs!"

"Oh ah, sir, they 'ave the tubs — plenty on 'em, sir, full o' ditch-watter! And the rest o' the lads safe away wi' the stuff — ah, it should be arl stowed safe an' sound by now, I rackon! So doan't ye worry your 'ead nor yet grizzle, Sir 'Ector. They sojers woan't never ketch Jarge, not by no means, an' in a bit they 'll be a-marchin' back a-carryin' o' they tubs o' watter mighty careful an' that 'appy-'earted, sir — like birds they 'll be — 'till they finds out, d' ye see. So —"

Here Mr. Bunkle's eloquence was again disturbed by shooting, a scattered volley so much nearer and louder that Sir John instinctively peered from the casement expecting to see the village start from its slumbers in clamorous dismay. But Alfriston slumbered on, it seemed as serenely unperturbed by such trivial happenings as the old Cross itself, which has doubtless known over much of the like episodes in its weary length of days; not a door opened,

not a light glimmered, not a sound broke the chaste quiet of its street save blustering wind and creaking sign.

"Aweel, aweel, I'm awa'!" quoth Sir Hector, taking hat and cloak. "Say what ye will, Bunkle man, musket-balls be ill things day or nicht, ye ken, an' amang the lads oot yonder be braw friends o' mine, so I'm awa' —"

"What to do, Hector?" inquired Sir John.

"Wha kens, lad, wha kens! But yon men ha' drunk wi' me an' grupped ma hand in friendship, an' I 'll dae wha' I may for 'em, be they smugglin'-bodies or no."

"Why, then, I'll come with ye, Hector —"

"Na, na, John! Hoot-toot, dinna be sic' a muckle fule —"

"If you go, Hector, so do I."

"But think, John, gin ye 're taken by Sayle's soldiers, damn him!"

"Your risk shall be mine, Hector!"

"Well spoke, sir!" nodded Mr. Bunkle. "Sir 'Ector must not be mixed up in to-night's business, not no'ow, sir, so if you be his friend —"

"Bunkle man, haud that clapper o' yours!" cried Sir Hector.

"Your hat and cloak, sir!" said the imperturbable Robert.

"Lead on, Hector, we follow!"

"John, ye 're an unco' obstinate, self-willed —"

"I am!" laughed Sir John, folding long cloak about him. "Especially to-night!"

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector, and strode forth of the inn.

## CHAPTER XXV

### Telleth How Sir John Beheld the Ghost

Down a dark and narrow lane Sir Hector led them, across a wide meadow, over a dim stream spanned by foot-bridge, along a glimmering road overhung by rustling trees, through a gate and so to a grassy, wind-swept upland crowned by a hedge with a mystery of trees beyond; a desolate gloom full of ghostly stirrings, with mournful sighs and groanings in every wind-gust. Here Sir Hector paused suddenly and stood very still and silent.

"And, pray, what now?" questioned Sir John.

"Whisht, lad! Can ye no' see I'm listenin'?"

"Aye, but why are you here? What do you purpose, Hector?"

"Wull ye no' be still, John?"

"Not until I know why you run such needless risk. If the preventive officers discover us we shall be apprehended as accessories. If you attempt to stay them in their duty, you will be branded as a smuggler yourself —"

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector, emitting a sound between laugh and groan.

"What is the meaning of it all, Hector?"

"Then, John, if ye must have it," answered Sir Hector in his precise English, "though as an elder of the Scottish Church, a baronet, a general and a MacLean o' Duart, I do not hold with the lawless and therefore nefarious traffic of smuggling, yet being also of a reprehensibly perverse and damnably adventurous spirit, I am the greatest smuggler of them all —"

"You, Hector . . . you?"

"Myself, John! I own the *True Believer*, every plank an' spar an' rivet — though ne'er a body kens it save Potter, Bunkle and Sharkie Nye. Aye, an' 't is mony a

hundred guineas I've handled these last twa years, but, bein' elder, y' ken, I've spent every penny on guid warks . . . there's the wee chapel ower to Berwick . . . the row o' almshooses ower to Seaford . . . there's blankets an' kindlin' to comfort auld banes i' the winter. An' yet, Johnnie, do what I will, the kirk elder in me canna' abide the smuggler, whateffer! So whate'er the smuggler gains, the elder spends. . . . And to-night that de'il Sayle hath loosed strangers and soldiers on us and thus . . . if the lads must run risk o' bullet and capture, so will I, since, like them, I'm just a smuggler. Aweel, here's my confession, an' muckle glad am I to be oot wi 't at last. An' now, John, what's your judgment?"

For a moment Sir John was silent, then he laughed a little unsteadily and slipped his hand within Sir Hector's arm.

"O Hector — thou paradox!" quoth he. "Was there ever stranger, more lovable anomaly than Hector Lauchlan MacLean . . . with his smuggling and almshouses? 'Faith, thou soarest far beyond my poor understanding. And how am I to judge thee? And, besides —"

"Sirs," said the corporal in sudden, hoarse whisper, "beg to report moving bodies on our left front."

Sure enough, between the fitful wind-gusts was a confused murmur of sound that grew momentarily louder, until they could distinguish the muffled trampling of horses toiling up the steep ascent. Suddenly, afar in the dimness was the flash and report of a musket, the whine of a bullet with a distant shouting and clamour of pursuit. On came the fugitives near and nearer, a vague blur, the dim shapes of scrambling horses and men; nearer, until the watches could hear the snort of labouring animals, the panting of men hard-pressed, a groan, a sobbing, muttered oath of pain and weariness, and then a voice cheery, dominating, familiar:

"Bear up, Tom lad, it be only a bit farther! Bear up an' we'll cog 'em yet. You, Dick, is yon keg loose?"

"Aye, Jarge, it be."

"Then let 'em 'ave it! Away wi't!"

Ensued a creak of leather, a heavy thud, and away down the slope bounded the unseen missile; and then horses and men were past and swallowed in the pervading gloom.

But from below rose shouts, cries and cheers, a growing tumult, and up the slope straggled the pursuers, a mixed company of soldiery and coastguards, pounding by with a rattle of accoutrements and the dull gleam of bayonet and cutlass.

And then Sir John found himself running also, but still grasping Sir Hector's arm and keeping always in the gloom of hedges; on and on till he was breathless; past gloomy trees, across dykes and ditches, stumbling and slipping yet still maintaining fast hold of his companion's arm; on through a dim-seen gate and so along a dusty road until Sir Hector halted all at once.

"Hark, John!" he panted. "Hark to yon!"

In their front was sudden clamour swelling to exultant shouts and cheers, whereupon Sir Hector cursed bitterly and hurried on again with tireless stride.

"What is it?" gasped Sir John.

"They 've captured some o' the lads!" panted Sir Hector. "An' now 't is tae the rescue or be taken wi' 'em . . . loose me, John!"

"No, by heaven!"

"Johnnie man — loose me! My place is beside the poor lads yonder."

"And I say 't is here —"

"By God, John — must I knock ye down?" Sir Hector's threatening fist was seized and held for a moment in the corporal's powerful grasp, while they reeled to and fro, all three locked in desperate grapple. Then Sir Hector, exerting his giant strength, hurled the corporal into the ditch, swung Sir John violently aloft, and as suddenly set him back upon his feet, for from the gloom before them rose a sound very awful to hear, the shrill screaming of a man in the direst extremity of agony or fear.

"Guid save 's a' — what 's yon?" gasped Sir Hector,

as the dreadful sound shuddered to silence. "O man, what awfu' thing is chancin'?"

A sudden shot, followed by three or four in rapid succession; a confusion of shrieks and hoarse outcries, a wild, rapidly growing hubbub.

"They 're running, sir!" quoth the corporal.

"They 're comin' back!" cried Sir Hector. "D' ye no' hear 'em, Johnnie — d' ye no' hear 'em?"

"Aye, Hector. And, by heaven, they run like madmen! Quick . . . behind this tree! Robert, are ye there?"

"On your honour's left flank!"

Crouched in the shadow, they waited; beheld dimly a wild rabble of fleeing men who sobbed and groaned and cast away weapons and equipment to aid their flight. For there, flitting in pursuit, was a monstrous and gruesome thing outlined in pallid flame, a gigantic horror that lifted high in air two huge, widespreading horns tipped with green fire. On it came, swiftly, silently, a ghastly shape of fear, at sight of which Sir Hector groaned aloud and strove to hide his gigantic person behind the tree, while Robert, recoiling upon his master, drew forth a pistol with shaking hand.

"Don't shoot!" cried Sir John in fierce command; even as he spoke the fearful thing flitted past and all suddenly was gone.

"Save us a'!" gasped Sir Hector. "Yon was a kelpie!" And, sitting down at foot of the tree, he took off his hat and wig to mop sweating brow, while the Corporal stood rigid, glaring, hand tight clenched upon the pistol he held.

"Your honour observed its horns?" he questioned at last hoarsely.

"I did, Robert!"

"Tipped wi' fire, sir, an' a yard wide, just as I told your honour."

"The description was very exact, Robert. I recognised your ghost on the instant."

"Ghost, is it?" quoth Sir Hector scornfully. "Man,

a ghost is a pretty poppet in comparison! Yon was a kelpie, I'm tellin' ye."

"And the soldiers are all fled away, Hector, and ha' left their prisoners behind 'em!"

"And likewise most o' their equipment, sir," added the Corporal.

"O John, O Johnnie man," moaned Sir Hector from his lowly seat, "'t is an awfu' thing we ha' seen this nicht!"

"True, Hector. But Mr. Potter and his fellows are safe, and we have taken no harm—"

"Whisht, lad! Dinna' be too sure; forbye I've an unchancy feelin' in ma wame, an' ma bowels be turned tae watter, Johnnie!"

"Then I suggest a jorum of Mr. Bunkle's gumboo."

"Na, na, Johnnie! When a man sees a kelpie 't is time for him tae think o' ither things, y' ken. . . . Come awa' hame wi' me instead, for 't is a solitary man I'll be the nicht."

Two o'clock was striking as they re-entered Alfriston to find it still lapped in peaceful slumber. Reaching his habitation, Sir Hector lifted the latch, but, finding the door gently resistant, paused.

"That 'll be Wully Tamson," he explained. "Wully always sleeps across the threshold whin he chances to be byordiner' fu'. Hey, Wully man, wake up!" And Sir Hector bowed mighty shoulder and hove the door wide enough to gain admittance, whereupon from the pitchy gloom arose reproachful groanings and plaintive mutterings that ended in stentorian snore. "Come in," quoth Sir Hector from the dark, "an' mind ye don't tread on Wully. . . . So! Now wait 'till I find the candle." Here the sound of ineffectual gropings and a splintering crash. "A' richt, Johnnie, 't was only a platter," Sir Hector explained, "though what 't was doin' on the mantelshelf I dinna' ken. . . . I pit the candle here somewhere, I 'll swear . . . ah!" Ensued the sound of flint and steel and in due season the candle was lighted to discover a

small, disordered room; before the ashes of a long-dead fire the single elbow-chair bore a pair of dusty riding-boots and the joints of a fishing-rod, while the table was littered with sundry unwashed crockery, amidst which reposed a weatherbeaten hat.

"'T is no' juist a palace, John, but what there is of it is hamely. . . . If ye'll pit some o' the crockery on the floor we'll crack a bottle for auld lang syne — what — ye'll no? Aweel, mebbe 't is a little early for't, an' we'll be better in bed."

"I think so, Hector. And I venture to suggest your cottage might be made even more homely by a woman with a brush, or a mop, or — "

"A wumman, Johnnie, a wumman? Hoot — toot, she'd juist tidy a' the comfort oot o' the place wi' her sweepin' an' scowerin' — a wumman? My certie! I do verra weel wi' Wully Tamson. Guid-nicht t' ye, John — "

"Begging your pardon, Sir Hector," quoth the Corporal, standing at attention, "but what might a kelpie be pre-cisely?"

"Why, Robbie man, a kelpie is a beastie that's no' a beastie, being supernatural, y' ken, and yet 't is a beastie o' sorts wi' horns an' hoofs, and no' a healthy sicht for ony man."

"And wherefore not healthy, sir?"

"Havers, man, because it is a kelpie, for sure! Johnnie man, I shall sleep wi' my pistols handy this nicht, for, though carnal weapons be no good against bogles whateffer, more especially kelpies, there's a deal o' comfort in the feel o' a pistol in your cloof."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### Concerns Itself Mainly with the "Morning After"

The sun's kindly beams were gilding the age-worn old Cross and making it a thing of glory, for it was a golden morning. And, looking from his lattice, Sir John blinked drowsily in the warm radiance, though Alfriston had been long awake and full of cheery, leisured bustle. Borne to him on the fragrant air was a mingling of comfortable, homely sounds: the faint rattle of crockery, the clank of a pail, a snatch of song, voices raised in greeting, a faint, melodious whistling, with the clink of hammer and anvil. Indeed, the only silent object in the whole cheery place seemed to be the weather-beaten old Cross itself.

Alfriston was serenely awake; folk went about their business with a placid deliberation, or paused to exchange comments on weather, present and to come, on growing crops and things in general, but with never a word for the desperate doings of last night.

True, Mr. Muddle, on his way to perform some mystery with the pitchfork he bore across his shoulder, limped noticeably in his gait, which was, as he very willingly explained, "Arl-on-'count-of-my ol' mare as put 'er 'oof down 'pon my fut that 'ard as 't is gert mercy I can walk at arl—"

Mr. Pursglove likewise exhibited a hand and forearm swathed in bandages which, he averred . . . "moight ha' been much worse, seein' the bill-'ook I 'apped tu be a-usin' of were so shaarp as a razor!" Also divers others of the community discovered upon their persons sundry bruises and abrasions, the which elicited little or no comment, for Alfriston, in its own gentle fashion, was very wide awake this morning.

Thus Sir John, lolling at night-capped ease, looked

down upon this placid, homely scene, hearkened to the soft-drawling, Sussex voices, breathed the fragrant air and felt that life was good. All at once he started, drew in his head with a jerk, and, snatching off his tasselled night-cap, peered from the secure shelter of the window-curtain.

She stood looking up at the old Cross, a tall, stately creature, and yet, despite her stature, there was in every supple line of her, in the very folds of her simple habit, that same air of clean, rustic maidenliness that Sir John remembered so well.

Her print gown was much the same as those worn by other country maids, and yet its effect how vastly different! How graciously it flowed, now hiding, now half-revealing her shapeliness; how cunningly it clung to pliant waist and full, rounded bosom. Her jetty curls were 'prisoned in a small, laced cap; in her hand she bore a deep-brimmed straw hat.

And thus, as she gazed up at the old Cross, Sir John gazed down on her, marvelling anew and happy in his wonderment.

Now as my lady stood viewing the ancient cross, there chanced by a country damsel with a large basket upon her arm — a shapely young girl with a remarkably trim foot and ankle.

"Pray, my dear," says my lady, waving her hat towards the old Cross, "what strange thing is this?"

"O mam," answers Rusticity, blushing and curtseying, "it be only the ol' market cross as arl strangers do come to stare at."

"Then," says my lady, smiling, "they might do better by staring at thee, for thou 'rt monstrous pretty."

"O mam!" falters Rusticity, with another curtsey.

"What is thy name, child?" questions my lady.

"Ann, if you please, mam — Ann Dumbrell."

"And why d' ye call me 'mam'?"

"Because, mam," answers Rusticity, blushing again, "because you be so . . . so fine, mam, an' arl!"

"Heavens!" exclaims my lady with a pretty petulance, "we must amend this, Ann! For look'ee, child, I be no finer than thyself — just a simple, country maid I be — and solitary. So I'll walk with thee, Ann, if I may. And my name is Rose."

"Yes, mam."

"Nay, call me 'Rose.'"

"Yes, Rose . . . mam."

"May I go with thee awhile, Ann? And don't say 'mam'!"

"Yes, m—Rose."

"Then I'll aid thee with thy basket — come!"

"Oh, no, no — Rose. My ol' trug be naun heavy, and your 'ands be so — so —"

"So what?"

"White an' pretty."

"Tush!" says my lady, scowling at the members in question. "They be very strong hands, child. Come, give me hold o' thy basket!"

And presently from the shadow of his curtain Sir John saw them walk away, the large basket a-swing between them, and they laughing and chatting together gaily.

No sooner were they out of sight than Sir John tossed night-cap to ceiling and rang the bell.

"Bob," quoth he as the corporal appeared, "Bob, why the devil am I not shaved and dressed?"

"Your honour's orders were for your honour not to be disturbed 'till ten o'clock, and 't is scarce nine, sir."

"No matter, Bob. Hot water!"

"Here, sir."

"Then have at me, Robert — proceed!"

"Im-mediate, sir!"

And Sir John's toilet commenced forthwith; during which nice business they conversed as follows:

Sir John: Any news, Bob?

Robert: Nothing to mention, sir . . . though I did

'appen to hear that five soldiers and two o' the coastguard are reported wounded, sir.

Sir John: Nothing serious, I hope?

Robert: We hope not, sir.

Sir John: An ugly business, Bob.

Robert: On-commonly, sir!

Sir John: Have you seen or heard anything of Mr. Potter?

Robert: No, sir. It seems he's vanished away again, being badly wanted by the preventive authorities. For I did 'appen to hear as 't was him as is judged responsible for most o' the casualties, sir.

Sir John: To be sure, he was wearing his old frieze coat! Ha' you been far abroad this morning, Bob?

Robert: I did 'appen to step across the fields, sir.

Sir John: Very right, Bob. Health! Sunshine! Dew!

Robert: It was a little doo-ey, sir.

Sir John: And you carried the basket, Bob, of course?

Robert: Basket, sir . . .?

Sir John: Her basket, Bob . . . and pray keep the shaving-brush out o' my mouth!

Robert: Your pardon, sir!

Sir John: Her basket, Bob!

Robert: I judged it over heavy for a young fe—

Sir John: Damsel, Bob.

Robert: Yes, sir.

Sir John: To be sure 't was too heavy — and I fancy you ha' lathered me enough.

Robert: I think so too, sir.

Sir John: She hath a remarkably neat foot, Bob!

Robert: I have ob-served same, sir.

Sir John: And her voice grows upon one. . . . A voice suggestive of a nature sweet and —

Robert: One moment, sir — your upper lip!

(A moment's silence while the corporal plies deft razor.)

Sir John: I chanced to see her in converse with a young . . . creature, Robert — a tall young woman in a laced cap?

ROBERT: I re-marked same young person myself, sir.

SIR JOHN: Is she a friend of Mistress Ann's?

ROBERT: Not knowing, can't say, sir.

SIR JOHN: Do you chance to know anything about this — er — young person?

ROBERT: Nothing, sir, except as she seems to run very much to legs —

SIR JOHN: Legs — begad!

ROBERT: Pre-cisely, sir . . . leggy, your honour.

SIR JOHN: Ha, leggy! Did n't you think her a young goddess?

ROBERT: She did n't strike me as such, sir.

SIR JOHN: But you must ha' remarked her beauty?

ROBERT: Nothing to mention, sir.

SIR JOHN: But damme — her shape! Her form! Her air! Her carriage! Her grace!

ROBERT: Too much of 'em all, sir.

SIR JOHN: 'S death, man — you must be blind!

ROBERT: Very good, sir.

SIR JOHN: No, Bob, not blind — thou 'rt merely in love and that is infinitely worse.

ROBERT: It is, sir!

SIR JOHN: Why, then, go a-wooing, man, go a-wooing and put thyself out o' thy misery one way or t' other.

ROBERT: Can't be done, sir. Misery must be endoored.

SIR JOHN: Because thou 'rt forty-five, Bob?

ROBERT: And she 's scarce twenty turned, sir.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sir John portentously, "Hum!" And, his toilet at last accomplished, he ran lightly down the stair to find awaiting him a most inviting breakfast, of which he made short work, despite Mr. Bunkle's shocked remonstrances and reproachful looks.

"This here b'iledam, sir," quoth Mr. Bunkle caressing the edible in question with the fork of an expert, "this here b'iledam desarves to be ate respectful an' dooly slow, wi' thought to every chew an' a pause betwixt each swaller!"

"Forgive me, Mr. Bunkle," smiled Sir John as he rose from the table, "but, like the chameleon, I could feed on

air — for a time at least! Robert, my holly-stick! I think I will call on our Ancient Mr. Dumbrell. Have ye any message, Bob?"

"None, sir."

"Why, then, I must invent some. You might step over to Dering later in the day, Robert. Adieu, Mr. Bunkle."

"Dinner at 'arf-past twelve, sir!" sighed Mr. Bunkle, laying down the carving fork, "roast Sir Loin — 'ot!"

## CHAPTER XXVII

### Telleth How Mr. Derwent Began His Wooing

Away strode Sir John across sunny fields, light of foot, treading a springy turf, breathing a fragrant air, swinging his holly-stick and vaulting stiles for the pure joy of it all. Birds piped and chirped from hedge and thicket, larks carolled in the blue, rills bubbled and laughed, and scabious flowers danced and swayed in the gentle wind in tune with the universal gladness.

And so in good time came Sir John to High Dering. For there, perched upon his accustomed stile in well-brushed hat and snowy smock-frock, sat the Ancient Person in animated converse with one who leaned gracefully against the gnarled post of the old stile, listening to the Aged One's talk, but watching Sir John from the shadow of her hat, with eyes quick to heed all the careless, easy grace of him as he came light-treading across the sun-dappled ling.

"Rose!" said he, and bared his head; now, beholding her startled, upward glance, how should he know the eyes had taken such note of his altered appearance, his plain attire? "Rose," said he, "thou Rose of love!" And stood bareheaded, glad-eyed to await her greeting.

"La, Mr. Derwent," said she, "you wear strange, small hat, sir, yet methinks it do become you better than your night-cap!"

"And yet 't is a very excellent night-cap!" he retorted.

"Eh — eh?" piped the Aged One. "Be ye man an' woife, then?"

"Not yet, Mr. Dumbrell, but — "

"Then wot 's she know about your noight-cap, young man, eh — eh? Tell oi that!"

"I — I saw it this morning," explained my lady, rather hastily — "this morning as he leaned out of his chamber window — "

"Then, young man, 'ow dare 'ee stick y'r noight-cap out o' winder in a purty maid's face? Shamed at 'ee, oi be!"

"But I drew it in again, Mr. Dumbrell!"

"No matter, young man, oi be shamed at 'ee! Wi' y'r noight-cap an' arl!"

"It shall not happen again, Mr. Dumbrell."

"Oi be a ol', ancient man, aye — a aged soul, oi be, an' oi knaws wot oi knaws an' oi knaws as us doan't want 'ee, young man, wi' your noight-cap, an' arl!"

Here the Aged One glared at the intruder with truculent eye, but Sir John was looking at my lady, of course.

"So I have found thee at last, my Rose!" said he softly.

"Ha' you looked for me, sir?"

"These very many weary days, child."

"Your honour expected me, then?"

"Hourly."

"And now that you behold me?"

"Now, Rose, the sun shines, the birds sing, the scabious flowers are a-dance in their myriad hosts, and here standeth John Derwent to woo thee —"

"Well, go 'way!" snarled the Aged One fiercely. "Go 'way; us doan't want 'ee no'ow, young man! Us be a-'arking to each other an' doan't want nobody — du us, my pretty? Lord, 'e du ha' put me out! Wot was oi a-tellin' ye, my dainty dear?"

"Of the day you and Sir Hector saved old Penelope the witch from being drowned . . . but the sun is very hot, pray put your hat on again, Mr. Dumbrell! Nay, suffer me!" So saying, my lady took the well-brushed hat and set it upon the old, white head so gently and with such pretty grace that the Aged One leered at Sir John in chuckling triumph.

"Us doan't want 'ee, young man, du us, my flower?"

"Indeed," she laughed, "but you find wondrous pretty names for me —"

"Because 't is purty you be . . . no, 'andsome's the word — a foine 'andsome wench."

"But over-large for a flower, I fear," she sighed.

"Sizeable!" nodded the Aged One. "But oi loikes 'em big — allus did. So doan't 'ee worrit naun 'count o' y'r size. An' as fur ol' Penelope, 'er desarved arl 'er got, bein' a witch. . . . An' when it come to savin' of 'er, I dunno as Sir 'Ector done so tur'ble much! Oi be an ol' ancient man, but oi bean't nowise doddlish, an' can save a witch as well as some young 'uns an' better 'n most — ah, that oi can!"

"I 'm sure of it! And is she still alive?"

"That she be. Witches bean't easy to kill an' doan't aften doi — not in Sussex, they doan't. Oi been buryin' folk arl my days an' oi only buried one witch, an' 'er only doied because she 'appened to drown, not being able to swim wi' a stone round 'er neck, d' ye see — "

"A — a stone?" exclaimed my lady in tones of horror.

"Aye, a stone fur sure, my pretty. Toied 'un round 'er neck, they did, an' 'ove 'er into the river, they did, an' so 'er doied. But this were years an' ages ago, when oi were younger. And ol' Penelope be a tur'ble powerful witch — give me a spell agin the axey as done me arl manner o' good."

"Did she cure you by magic?"

"Lord bless y'r pretty eyes — no! There bean't nobody nor nothink can cure oi, what wi' that theer ol' musket-ball o' mine. But oi were moighty bad, an' 'long come a man one day in a p'inted 'at an' a gownd wi' silver stars on to it an' sold me a charm wrote on a three-carnered piece o' paper wi' these words as oi were to say three toimes over, marnin', noon an' noight:

> Axey, axey oi defoi thee,
> Three days shiver, three days shake,
> Mak' me well fur Marcy's sake.

Well, oi sez 'em over an' over 'till oi were black i' the faace, but it did n't seem tu du me no good at arl, 'till one

day 'long comes ol' Penelope, tears up my charm an' gi'es me some stuff in a liddle bottle as oi must rub arl over myself . . . which oi done. An' Lord — arter a bit oi got that skittish — used t' kick up my 'ind legs loike any colt . . . an' me a married man an' arl. Oi dunno as if oi — "

"Grandfeäther!"

"Dannel it! That be my rum-an'-milk!" exclaimed the Aged One, scowling.

"Grandfeäther, be ye comin'?"

"Arl roight, lass, arl roight!" piped the old man pettishly, getting from his perch with surprising nimbleness. "Oi 'll 'ave to go, my pretty bird, oi 'll 'ave to leave 'ee or 't will be milk an' no rum! Ann be that 'ard-'earted an' . . . Arl roight, Nan, 'ere oi be!" This as his granddaughter appeared, who, beholding Sir John, blushed and curtseyed. Quoth she:

"'T is tur'ble kind o' you to bide an' keep 'im comp'ny, Rose — mam, for 'e du be that mischievious — "

"Never tak' no 'eed o' my Nan, 'er 's a babe!" retorted the Aged One. "An' oi du 'ope as you 'll come an' talk tu oi again, my Beauty Broight, fur oi doan't tak' naun account o' little 'uns, an' you be a foine up-standin', down-sittin' wench, sure-ly! An' the young 'un 'ere thinks the same, doan't 'ee, young man?"

"I do!" answered Sir John fervently. "Indeed, I have never seen a more up-standing, down-sitting wench in all my life!"

"Well, then, whoy doan't 'ee up an' tell 'er so, wi'out me a-doin' it fur 'ee. You be sweet on 'er, oi s'pose?"

"Monstrous so!"

"Well, then, whoy caan't 'ee tell 'er summat about it? Ye caan't expect oi tu du it fur 'ee arl the toime. 'Ere you 've stood a-lookin' an' a-starin' an' so silent as a turmut! That bean't no waay tu win a wench — no! Lord, oi were different in my young days; oi knawed the waay tu go a-wooin'! An' oi ain't forgot yet, though I be such a ol', aged soul!"

"Then perhaps you will help me, now and then?" Sir John suggested.

"Whoy, sence you ax me so sensible an' modest-loike, oi dunno as oi wunt. For, if you bean't much to look at, you be batter 'n some, an' she moight du worse."

"It is possible!" sighed Sir John.

"So oi dunno as oi wunt put in a word for 'ee noo an' then wi' the lass. But moind ye if oi win 'er for 'ee an' she doan't turn out arl as you expect, an' woives never do no'ow, doan't 'ee go fur to blame oi!"

"Grandfer, your rum-an'—"

"Hesh a minute, Nan, hesh an' lemme finish, will 'ee? Marriage, young man, be arl roight whiles ye be single, but when you be married 't is generally-mostly-arlways arl wrong—oi' ve troid it twoice, an' oi knaw! So jest so soon as she begins to feel weddin'ish, oi leaves the matter to you. An' now, Nan, gimme y'r arm!"

"Boide a minute, Grandfeäther—"

"Whaffor, Nan? Ain't ye kep' me a-waiting long enough?"

"I 've a message for the gen'elman—"

"Gen'elman, lass? 'Oo? Wheer? D' ye mean—'im?" And the Aged One pointed at Sir John with wavering stick. "'E bean't no gen'elman—look at 'is 'at! Gen'elman's 'ats 'as goold lace onto 'em loike Sir 'Ector's of a Sunday an' Lord Sayle's of a week-day. Look at 'is coat—so plain! An' 'e aren't got no sword neether! Gen'elman—'im? 'E be jest a respectable young man—"

"You hear that, Rose?" cried Sir John, ecstatic. "You hear? There speaketh hoary Wisdom!"

"'Oo 's 'oary—me?" demanded the Aged Soul, scowling.

"Yourself, Mr. Dumbrell, and are therefore to be revered. Your hand, Sir Reverence, your hand, I beg!"

"Whoy, oi dunno as oi loike the sound o' that 'ere word—"

"Mr. Dumbrell, you in your nescience saw 'neath the hollow shams and know me for what I truly am, a re-

spectable young man. O most excellent Aged Soul, I thank thee for that word! Mr. Dumbrell, your hand, pray."

So, after some little hesitation, the sharp-tongued, little old man reached tremulous hand to Sir John's warm clasp, and, looking up into Sir John's smiling eyes, the Aged Soul smiled also; quoth he:

"Young man, oi dunno as you bean't better-lookin' than what oi thought — leastways your eyes is worth any lass a-lookin' at, oi rackon, an' — whoy, what be this 'ere?" And the old man stared down at his open palm. "By the Pize — a guinea! Dannel it, young man, what be this fur? What do 'ee mean by it?"

"Do not be angry, Mr. Dumbrell; pray accept it as a small mark of esteem and gratitude from one respectable man to another."

"Whoy, since you puts it that ways, young man, we woan't arg' about it, an' oi dunno as oi bean't almoighty glad of 't. . . . A guinea, Nan, a goolden guinea! 'Ere be baccy for oi an' that 'ere cherry ribband for you, an' sugar for oi, an' a noo 'at for oi. . . . Young man, oi thank 'ee, an' so du Nan. . . . Thank 'un, Nan, mak' y'r reverence an' show y'r manners, lass!"

"Not forgetting your message, Ann," prompted Sir John.

"Yes, sir," she answered, curtseying repeatedly, "though 't were only Grammer Haryott as bid me say if I see you, sir, as she would like a word wi' you, sir."

"What about my rum-an'-milk?" demanded the Aged Soul pettishly. "'Ere be oi a-vadin' an' famishin' an' perishin' awaay, an' you a-maggin' an' me a-waitin' an' nobody to 'tend to oi no'ow, nowhen nor nothin'! Come an' gimme my rum-an'-milk or no ribbands, moind that! G'marnin', young man, an' doan't 'ee go a-throwin' your money away so woild-loike an' rackless! Marnin', my purty dear! You 'll foind oi settin' a-top o' stoile every marnin' when it be sunny." So saying, the Aged Soul

bared his white head gallantly, nodded, and suffered his dutiful granddaughter to lead him away.

My lady was silent awhile, watching them as they went, the girl so young and strong and motherly, the old man so bowed and feeble; and Sir John, regarding his companion keen-eyed, saw in her look an unwonted tenderness and, when at last she spoke, heard her voice strangely tender also.

"O Sussex!" she murmured. And then: "They are worth caring for, these unspoiled folk o' the Down Country."

"They are, Herminia!" he answered. At this she turned and looked at him, frowning a little.

"Have you done so, Sir John?" she questioned. "Have you cared for their comfort and welfare?"

"Alas, no!" he answered. "I, like you, my lady, have preferred the town hitherto, and, heaven help me, was therewith fairly content! Which is matter for some wonder, for here were the Downs and here the Dumbrell—"

"That Aged Soul!" she added, smiling suddenly. "As gallant as any town beau, more dignified, and infinitely more sincere."

"Rose child, I perceive thou hast also found eyes to see withal!"

"Is this so amazing, your honour?"

"Not so much as to behold a fine lady who honours Rusticity and finds joy in simple, homely things."

"Indeed, sir, I do love the country, especially Sussex, for, as your honour may ha' forgot, I was born here."

"Then, if you will, I can show you other wonders. First, there is Dame Penelope Haryott, whom fools call a witch and rogues have sought to murder, ere now."

"Murder!" exclaimed my lady, wrinkling her brow. "Oh! And yet surely witches be horrid creatures! Ha'n't you read of 'em? . . . Leagued with all manner of evil spirits for the working of evil. . . . Ha'n't you read what learned philosophers ha' writ concerning 'em, sir?"

"Aye, I have."

"Well, if this woman be truly a witch — "

"But was there truly ever a witch, child?"

"Your honour may have heard of the Witch of Endor?"

"Hum!" quoth Sir John. "Can it be that you believe in witchcraft, black magic and the like fooleries?"

"Don't you, sir?"

"No more than I do in ghosts, child."

"The girl Ann tells me that ghosts often walk in these parts."

"Aye, so they do," laughed Sir John, "and to some purpose."

"Then, despite the Bible and philosophers, your superior wisdom doth not believe in witches?"

"No, indeed."

"Nor ghosts?"

"No, child."

"Because you chance never to ha' seen one, sir!"

"Because I have, rather. Indeed, Rose, a most effective ghost — "

"You have positively seen a ghost? When? Where?" she demanded. But, turning a bend in the road, they came upon a horseman, a cadaverous person in threadbare clerical garb, who bestrode a very plump steed.

"A fair prospect to the eye!" he exclaimed, nodding gloomily towards Dering Village, where it nestled under the sheltering Down. "Aye, a fair prospect, and yet, in very truth, a 'whited sepulchre' . . . not a thatch that does n't leak, scarce a cottage that is truly habitable — "

"Shameful!" exclaimed my lady.

"And wicked!" added the parson in his gentle voice, his haggard face very woeful. "For how shall folk take heed to their soul's welfare until their bodies be comfortable? Alas, you behold yonder the evils of a bad landlord. Sir John Dering hath much to answer for. Better he were dead and the land in better keeping."

"Dead, sir!" exclaimed my lady, aghast.

"And wherefore not?" continued the parson in his

gentle accents, while his eyes smouldered. "A merciless, grinding bailiff and a profligate landlord make for a suffering tenantry."

"You are the Reverend Mr. Hartop, I think, sir?" questioned Sir John, bowing.

"The same, sir," answered the parson, returning the salute. "And I, who know and love these rustic folk, say again that for the general good, an evil landlord is better dead. . . . And consider Sir John Dering's reputation, his scandalous life!"

"True!" sighed Sir John; "his reputation doth show him a very monster of iniquity."

"God forgive him!" sighed the parson. "Duellist and man of blood, desperate gambler and of wild, unholy life. . . . A few poor hundreds of the guineas he throws away at the gaming-table or wastes on nameless evil would mean all the difference 'twixt misery and happiness, sickness and health to the folk of High Dering. Heaven forgive the Wicked Dering the evil he hath wrought."

"Amen!" added Sir John. "How potent and far-reaching is a man's reputation, Rose!"

"How different the son from his honoured sire!" sighed Mr. Hartop.

"Alas, yes, sir!" answered Sir John. "And yet, sir, I have it on excellent authority that this most iniquitous gentleman hath lately become a 'respectable young man.'"

"Sir," exclaimed the parson, opening his mild eyes a little wider than usual, "sir, you amaze me! Heaven send it be indeed so, for his own sake and the future welfare of his neglected people." Saying which, Mr. Hartop lifted shabby hat and rode gloomily away.

"'For the general good,'" repeated Sir John wistfully, "'for the general good an evil landlord were better dead'! Here is an arresting thought, child . . . and how bitterly true!"

"But you are alive!" said she, staring towards the quiet village beneath wrinkled brows. "Live, then, to better purpose."

"Ah, Rose," he sighed, "thy pretty moralities fall so trippingly from thy rosy, innocent lip; thou art in thy simple wisdom such an angel of inspiration that I would we had met . . . five weary years ago!"

"Five years ago?" she repeated, turning upon him. "Have you forgot—?" Here, beholding his grim-smiling mouth, the mockery of his eyes, she caught her breath and was silent.

"Five long years ago, child, I killed a man—by accident. Ah, sweet Rose, gentle maid, if only thou hadst come to me then . . . to soothe my bitter grief! Dear, lovely Rose, that little 'if' held, then as now, a world of possibilities even for such an abandoned wretch as 'the Wicked Dering.' But we are still alive, and to live is to hope. . . . And Dame Haryott desires speech with me. And thou would'st behold a witch, so come thy ways with thy loving, gentle John."

"Gentle?" cried she angrily. "Aye, with the eyes of a mocking fiend!"

"But the heart of a respectable young man, Rose!"

"Your crime brought its own consequences, sir."

"It did!" he sighed. "And not the least of 'em, thyself! When wilt marry me?"

"Never!"

"Then the matter being settled—for the present, let us to the witch, hand in hand like good friends.

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Leave me, sir!"

"Give me thy hand."

"Oh—I hate you!" she cried passionately.

"Good!" he nodded placidly. "'T is better than indifference. Thy hand, Rose."

For answer she turned away, silently contemptuous, and began to retrace her steps; but he caught her wrist and checked her suddenly, whereupon she struck viciously at him, knocking off his hat, then her other hand was 'prisoned also in so tense a grip that, knowing it vain to

struggle, she disdained further effort and faced him, coldly defiant.

"Coward, you hurt me!"

"Madam, you behave like a peevish hoyden! Such tricks may pass with your hysterical fine ladies but, while in Sussex, I suggest you ape the dignified calm o' Rusticity."

"Will you loose me?"

"Are you done with your fishwifely tantrums?"

My lady held herself pridefully, glared furiously, then suddenly bit her lip, bowed her head, and something bright and sparkling fell upon his hand; at this he loosed her suddenly and she as suddenly turned her back upon him.

Sir John picked up his hat, knocked the dust from it, put it on, and stood regarding her pensively.

"Rose," said he at last, "dear child, suffer me to take thy hand." Then he reached and clasped her unresisting fingers; and thus, hand in hand, they went on down the lane together.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### Telleth How My Lady Adopted a Fairy Godmother

High Dering, drowsing in the sun, opened a door here and there to stare in idle wonderment as Sir John handed his companion in at Dame Haryott's garden wicket, for visitors were rare, more especially such visitors as these who bowed and curtseyed to each other with such courtly, albeit frigid, ceremony; so High Dering opened its doors a little wider and became a trifle more awake as Sir John knocked.

And, after some while, chains rattled, bolts creaked, the heavy door opened, and old Penelope stood peering at them from the dim interior.

"Good-day, Mrs. Penelope," said Sir John, removing his hat and saluting her in his easy, unaffected manner. "You desired to see me, I think?"

"Aye, I did," she answered ungraciously, "but not along of a tattlin' wench."

My lady stared and flushed angrily.

"I will go!" said she, and drawing herself to her noble height, turned away, supremely disdainful as an outraged goddess; but old Penelope, who knew little of goddesses and cared less, was no whit abashed.

"Hoity-toity!" quoth she; "bide a bit, wench!" And my Lady Herminia found her stately progress checked by the crook of old Penelope's stick that had hooked itself suddenly about her arm.

My lady turned and, amazed beyond speech, viewed the audacious old creature from head to foot until, meeting the fierce old eyes, her gaze paused there and thus, for a long moment, they stared at each other, the old woman and the young, while Sir John wisely held his peace.

"Ha!" exclaimed Dame Haryott at last, looking more malevolent and witch-like than usual, "an' who be you,

young mistress, wi' white 'ands, an' dressed out like a country-lass, as do carry y'rself so proudlike? Hush and I 'll tell 'ee. You be one as long loved Love, an' sought it vainly till, one day, ye found it — in your own heart . . . the love for a man —"

"I — I love no man!" cried my lady with a strange vehemence.

"Bah!" quoth Penelope harshly, "'t is peepin' at me from y'r eyes, flushin' in y'r cheek. First, 't was love o' y'rself, which was a bad love, but now . . . aha, now it be love for a man! A love as shall grow an' grow till it be a pain . . . some love be a pain, I know . . . and 't is the only love worth 'aving!"

"I love no man!" repeated my lady.

"Shall I speak his name, mistress?"

"No — no!" answered my lady, a little breathlessly.

"Oho!" chuckled old Penelope in most witch-like manner. "Oho! . . . 'no, no!' quo' she! . . . An' 'er so proud an' arl! But I know, aye, ol' Pen knows! For I loved once when the world was younger an' kinder. . . . I were tall then, and nigh prideful as you, afore age an' sorrow bent me an' love humbled me. Love? Aye, but 't was worth the pain, for 't was a love hath sweetened the bitter o' the long, weary years, an' cheered my loneliness . . . a love as I shall tak' wi' me to a better place an' find Happiness at last, maybe — Happiness . . . after s' much bitter solitude!"

Suddenly the old eyes were upturned to the radiant heaven, their fierceness was softened by the glitter of slow-gathering, painful tears; and then, upon that bowed and aged shoulder came a hand, a gentle hand yet strong, for all its white delicacy; and my lady spoke in voice Sir John had never heard from her before:

"Art so very lonely?"

"Lonely?" The word was a groan, and the drooping shoulders sank lower. "I 've been a lone soul all my days — wi' none to care for me since HE died, an' none to tak' my part except Jarge and Sir Hector . . . the liddle

children mock me . . . the women be worse! An' I du be gettin' that old and weary! . . . Sometimes I can scarce brave it any more!"

"Wilt take me for thy friend, old Penelope?"

The old woman lifted white head proudly as any person of quality might have done and stared at my lady keenly, then reached up and patted the hand upon her shoulder.

"'T is come too late!" sighed she. "You be too young an' I be too old for friendship . . . but I thank ye kindly."

"Then you'll suffer me to come and talk with you sometimes, Penelope?"

"Why, ye see, the roof leaks, an' the chimbley smokes — "

"The more shame to Sir John Dering!" exclaimed my lady fiercely.

"Aye, 't were different in the ol' squire's time — the other Sir John as marched away wi' his sojers an' never came back . . . the world was better then . . . 'specially High Dering. But to-day they name me witch, an' a witch's cottage bean't no place for young maids — 'specially your sort! But since you be here, come in an' sit ye down — both on ye! An' if ye'll wait 'till my kittle b'iles I'll brew ye a dish o' tea — "

"Tea?" exclaimed my lady.

"Aye, I generally tak's a drop towards noon; it do warm my old bones!" So saying, she led them into the cottage and very carefully locked, bolted and chained the door.

"I do this," she explained, "because happen they may come an' mak' trouble for me — sudden-like!"

"Who, pray?" demanded my lady indignantly.

"Any fule as finds 'is cow gone dry, or 'is crop blighted, or 'is horse off its feed, or his child in a fit. . . . Lord bless 'ee, child, doan't stare so! Ye see folks thinks I 've 'the evil eye' an' can blast 'em with a look . . . aye, but I wish I could, that I du!"

"And so," continued Sir John, "they have stoned her,

set dogs on her, and threatened her with death by water and the fire, ere now — "

"Aye, but the dogs be worst!" cried old Penelope, giving the fire a savage poke. "I can't abide dogs!"

"By heaven!" exclaimed my lady in sudden ferocity, "would I were a man!"

"By heaven!" retorted Sir John, "I rejoice that you are not!"

"Tush!" she cried angrily, "'t is time there came a man to High Dering!"

"I have thought so too!" he answered gravely.

"Nay, I mean a strong man — a man of action!"

So saying, my lady rose contemptuous, seeming to fill the small place with the majesty of her presence.

"Dear Penelope," said she gently, "suffer me to do that for you — I 'll lay the cloth and — "

"No, no!"

"But I say yes!"

"Oh do ye an' arl!" exclaimed the old woman fiercely. "This be my own cottage till they turn me out an' then — "

"Turn you out?"

"Aye, in two or three wiks!"

"You hear, sir; you hear?"

"I do!" answered Sir John.

"And when you are homeless, Penelope, what shall you do?"

"Walk an' tramp 'till I caan't go no further, an' then find a quiet corner to die in — "

"Nay, that you shall not!" cried my lady passionately. "I will take ye — you shall come to me, I will adopt you — "

"Eh — eh!" gasped old Penelope, and very nearly dropped her cherished Chinese teapot.

"You shall come to me, Penelope," repeated my lady, taking the teapot from her tremulous fingers. "I shall adopt you — nay, my dear soul, never doubt me, I mean it every word!"

"But . . . but," stammered old Penelope, "they call me a witch! They . . . they—"

"Devil take 'em!" exclaimed my lady. "I will care for thee, Penelope! Shalt find peace and comfort at last, thou brave soul!" And here, seeing the old creature's pitiful amaze, my lady stooped suddenly and pressed warm lips on her wrinkled brow.

"Lord God!" exclaimed old Penelope, and sinking into the elbow-chair, hid her face in her toil-worn hands. And presently she spoke in voice harsh and broken, "There be nobody . . . has kissed me . . . since my dyin' mother, long an' long ago!"

"My dear soul!" said my lady, and Sir John saw her eyes suddenly brim with tears. "My dear soul, there is a woman shall kiss away thy sorrows if she may. . . . For to-day, Penelope, thou hast found a friend and I a—a fairy godmother! Let me kiss thee again, godmother!"

Slowly old Penelope raised her head to look into the face bowed above her.

"Happen I be dreamin'," she sighed, "an' shall wake by an' by—but, O child, it be good to dream—sometimes."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### Giveth Some Descriptions of a Tea-Drinking

"'T is most excellent tea!" quoth my lady. "I vow I have never drank better!"

"Arl the way from Chaney, mam."

"And these beautiful dishes!"

"Chaney, too!" nodded old Penelope, proudly. "An' look at my teapot! I means to tak' it along wi' me when they do turn me out, though 't will be a bit 'ard to carry, I rackon. But ye see, mam, I—"

"Nay, godmother, call me Rose."

"No, mam, it doan't come easy to my tongue."

"I may call you Penelope, may n't I?"

"For sure!"

"And fairy godmother?"

"Aye, though I be more witch than fairy, I rackon."

"Then, godmother Penelope, pray call me Rose."

"Rose, then!" she snapped.

"I think," said Sir John in his pleasant voice, "you have some message for me, Mrs. Penelope?"

"Gimme time, young man, gimme time! I bean't kissed an' called a fairy every day, so gimme—" She paused suddenly and seemed to listen intently. "I rackon you 'd best be goin'—both on ye!"

"But why, pray?" demanded my lady.

"Happen I 'll ha' trouble here presently."

"Then, of course, I shall stay with you!" quoth my lady in her most determined manner, but glanced round sharply, as upon the back door of the cottage sounded three soft raps repeated three several times.

"That will be Mr. Potter, I think," said Sir John. "Shall I let him in?"

"Since ye seem to know arl about it, young man, ye may."

Scarcely had Sir John loosed the bolts than, sure enough, Mr. Potter slid into the room and proceeded to lock and bolt and chain the door, further securing it with a stout iron bar that he reached from adjacent corner; thus busied, he spoke, albeit gasping a little with his late exertions.

"They nigh 'ad me once, Pen . . . but I slipped 'em . . . t' other side the . . . 'anging wood. But I've gotten an 'are for ye . . . a praper big 'un as I took . . . in Dering Park and . . . by the Pize!" he exclaimed as, turning, he espied my lady.

Mr. Potter was hardly himself, for his hat was gone, his clothes were torn and stained with the mud and green slime of damp hiding-places, while his unkempt hair clung in elf-locks about an unshaven face, grimed with dust and streaked with sweat; moreover, beneath one arm he carried a short, though very formidable bludgeon.

"Who is this horrid person?" demanded my lady, and took up the boiling kettle in her defence.

"By Goles!" ejaculated Mr. Potter, and, eyeing her heroic proportions and determined air, retreated to the door.

"Rose," said Sir John, intervening, "it is my joy to present my friend, Mr. George Potter. Mr. Potter — Mrs. Rose!"

"Friend?" she repeated. "Your friend? Is he a murderer or merely a thief?"

"Neither, child. He is simply a friend o' mine temporarily embarrassed by — circumstances."

Mr. Potter made a leg and touched an eyebrow in polite salutation, and diving into the inner mysteries of the frieze coat, brought thence a large hare, which he laid upon the little dresser. Quoth he, "Theer 'e be, Pen! 'E should keep 'ee goin' for a day or so, I rackon."

"Aye, Jarge, an' thank 'ee!"

"An' now I 'll better be goin'."

"What be your 'urry, lad? There be rum i' the cupboard an' kittle 's a-biling."

"Aye, I see it be!" answered Mr. Potter, retreating to the door again.

"Then sit 'ee down, do!"

"Why, y' see, Pen, Oxham an' 'is men be a-seekin' 'ereabouts, an' I won't 'ave 'em mak' trouble for you arl along on account o' pore Potter—"

"Bah!" exclaimed old Penelope fiercely. "What do I care for 'em! They can't frutten me. So sit ye down, Jarge."

"Why, I bean't 'ardly fit for comp'ny, Pen, and—" Mr. Potter suddenly held his peace, and they heard a distant shout, a clamour of voices, a growing hubbub. "They 've winded me, I rackon!" said he.

"Aye," nodded Penelope composedly, "they 'll be breakin' the door in prensly! So get ye below, Jarge, get ye down under stone."

"No, no, Pen, they 'll come here sure an' pull the old place t' bits, an' if they should find me 't would be bad for us both! No, I 'll cut stick whiles I can, Pen!" And, crossing to the front door, Mr. Potter reached to draw the bolts then hesitated and stood listening, while old Penelope peered through the lattice.

"Ye be too late, Jarge," said she calmly, "there be three or four of 'em waitin' for ye in the road."

"An' pore Potter thought as he 'd tricked 'em in Dering Wood!" sighed Mr. Potter gloomily. "An' if they tak' me in your cottage, Pen, they 'll take you 'long as my accomplish—"

"Let 'em!" said she serenely. "But as for you, get 'ee down under stone quick!"

Mr. Potter still hesitated, hearkening to the shouts and hallooing, the awful sound of the hue and cry that grew louder every moment.

"What is it?" questioned my lady, clasping her hands, for the terror seemed all about the cottage. "Oh, what does it mean?"

"Hold y'r tongue, lass!" answered Penelope. "You 'll know soon enough, I rackon!"

"The witch's cottage!" boomed a voice. "The old hag'll know where t' find him, sure!" Here a clamour of assent. "If she doan't open the door, burst it in!" boomed Mr. Oxham again.

"I be main grieved for this, Pen!" sighed Mr. Potter, crossing to the hearth in his leisured fashion, "but what is to be — must be!" So saying, he thrust an arm up the wide chimney and pulled lustily at some hidden object, whereupon was a creaking sound and my lady shrank back, uttering a gasp of surprise to see the broad hearthstone sink from sight and in its place a yawning cavity.

"Quick, Jarge!" warned Penelope, still peering from the lattice.

"If they dogs start ill-usin' of 'ee, Pen, I be a-comin' up!" quoth Mr. Potter, seating himself upon the floor, his legs a-dangle in the void below. "You, Mus' Derwent," he continued appealingly, "you took 'er part once afore —"

"And will again," answered Sir John cheerily, "so down with ye, man; trust me, old Penelope shall suffer no harm."

"God bless 'ee, sir!" growled Mr. Potter, and immediately vanished, whereupon the hearthstone rose demurely into place and became as innocent-seeming as any in all Sussex; then, setting the elbow-chair upon it, Penelope sat down and spread her thin, work-worn hands to the comfort of the fire.

"An' now, my dear," said she, "if there be any tay left, I'd like another cup." So, while clamour raged without, my lady manipulated the priceless teapot, and Sir John, noting her firm wrist and untroubled demeanour, smiled happily.

And then was a tramp of feet, violent blows upon the door, and Mr. Sturton's voice more authoritative than usual:

"Penelope Haryott, open the door! 'T is me, James Sturton! Open the door, d' ye hear me?"

"Aye, I 'ears ye," cried the old woman, "an' I spits!"

"Damned hag!—will ye open?"

"Galler's-bird, no!"

"Then we'll break it down!"

"Why, then, break away, an' a bloody end t' ye, James Sturton!" answered old Penelope, sipping her tea with relish.

A stick shivered one of the few remaining panes of glass in the lattice, and Mr. Oxham's voice boomed:

"You shall suffer for it, Pen Haryott, when us do come in!"

"Bah!" she laughed in fierce derision. "I be used to suffering!" Here the stout door shook to a fierce blow that seemed the signal for others, for there began a furious battering.

"Sit still, young man," cried old Penelope above the din, for Sir John had risen—"sit ye still! 'T is a strong door an' should hold 'em till we ha' finished our tea-drinking, I rackon."

"But," answered he, as the hammering momentarily subsided, "it seems shameful to permit them to destroy your property—"

"My property!" cried she. "Mine? Lord, you must be a gert fool of a young man!"

"Howbeit," he answered, "we will endeavour to quiet 'em; their noise offends me." So saying, Sir John drew the bolts and, turning the massive key, flung the door wide and thus came face to face with Mr. Oxham supported by some half-score sturdy fellows who crowded the little front garden and kept back the throng of excited villagers.

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Oxham, recoiling a step; "so 't is you again, is it?"

Sir John affably admitted the fact.

"We want George Potter!"

"You usually do, it seems."

"And we be a-comin' into this cottage to find him!"

"I think not!"

Here Mr. Sturton pushed his way to the fore.

"Look 'ee here, you!" quoth he, wagging bodeful finger,

"if you bean't out o' this in two minutes we'll apprehend you as the accomplice o' this curst smuggler, this rogue Potter as dared to fire on the King's uniform last night. We means to get him if we ha' to pull this cottage down. Are ye goin' to let us in?"

"Where is your search-warrant?" demanded Sir John.

"Search-warrant be damned!" roared Mr. Oxham. "We are here to tak' George Potter, aye — and the old witch along wi' him — "

"And I," answered Sir John, slim hands disappearing into coat-pockets, "am here to prevent you."

The man Oxham swung up his stick, Sir John stepped lightly back, and his hands flashed to view, each grasping a small, pocket-pistol, very arresting for all their lack of size. "Look 'ee, fellow," quoth he, "I ha' no particular desire for your blood, but come one step nearer, you or any o' your men, and I break that man's leg!"

"Don't believe him, lads!" cried Sturton. "He 'd never dare; the law 's behind us; he 'd never dare shoot; 't would mean hanging or transportation."

"Very well," answered Sir John; "pray step forward, Mr. Sturton, and see for yourself."

"Aye," quoth Mr. Oxham, "you lead the way, Sturton, an' we'll foller!"

Mr. Sturton scowled at the threatening pistol-muzzles, at the serenely determined face behind them, and hesitated, as well he might.

And then, all in a moment, Sir John found matters taken entirely out of his hands; he saw an out-thrust, shapely arm, felt himself pushed aside with surprising ease, and my lady was between him and his would-be assailants. For a moment she faced the astonished crowd proudly contemptuous, and when she addressed them her disdain was such that despite hot anger she never thought to swear.

"Animals," said she, "get out of my sight!"

For a moment was amazed silence, then rose a murmur, an angry growl.

"Who be the likes o' her to miscall the likes o' we?" cried a voice. "She be nobody — look at 'er gownd!"

Then Mr. Oxham spoke:

"You be a fine piece, I'll allow, mistress, aye — fit for a lord or a dook ye be, but your handsome looks won't —" Here, suddenly espying the nature of the weapon she held, he shrank and cowered away. "'Ware of her, Sturton!" he cried, but all too late, for with a graceful sweep of her long arm she swung the large pitcher she had hitherto kept hidden, discharging its boiling contents over the huddled crowd in a streaming deluge, whereupon arose screams, curses, groans, a very pandemonium, as these men, who had fronted Sir John's pistols, retreated in wild confusion. Reaching the road, they halted to stamp and swear, while Mr. Oxham roared threats and cherished scalded face, and Sturton, cursing all and sundry, cried shame on them to "be beat by a damned slip o' shrewish womanhood!" to such effect that they were presently back again more viciously threatening than ever, though keeping well away from the tall young amazon who stood with pitcher recharged and the light of battle in her eyes, strung for action, yet supremely disdainful of them, one and all.

So was a momentary respite, for the men, uncertain and a little shamefaced, hung back, despite Sturton's lashing tongue and Oxham's bellowing. And then arose warning shouts from their fellows who guarded the roadway, a clatter of horse-hoofs and sounds of sudden strife, whereupon Oxham's men hastened to join the fray. Thus the turmoil grew, while up rose a swirling cloud of dust wherein men strove hand to hand, a fierce hurly-burly whence ever and anon was heard a wild, eldritch screech of exultation. Suddenly, high above the reeling press, two legs appeared, very helpless legs that writhed and contorted themselves in desperate but futile kickings ere they vanished. Then the close-locked fray was split asunder, and through the seething dust a gigantic form appeared, with a man clutched helpless beneath each

mighty arm, and who paused to glare round about and note the havoc he had wrought upon his bruised and dismayed assailants, and to vent another fierce screech of triumph ere he became articulate.

"Ye fules!" he roared. "Dinna' anger me — dinna' rouse the auld Adam in me or mebbe I'll be hurtin' some o' ye!"

Thus stood Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean, the very incarnation of strife, hatless and wigless, his clothes rent and torn, his wretched captives struggling vainly in the grasp of his arms, his lean face flushed with the ecstasy of the moment.

"Wha' stays a MacLean meets the de'il!" quoth he. "An' here's MacLean the noo, an' whaur's the man tae gainsay him? You, Oxham-laddie, an' you, Sturton, is it battle and bluidshed ye're wantin'? If aye, speak the worrd. If no', get ye oot o' Dame Haryott's but-an'-ben, an' quick aboot it, for I'm fair yearnin' for a wee mair tulzie-mulzie, y' ken!"

"We've no quarrel wi' you, Sir Hector," answered Mr. Oxham sullenly.

"Mair's the peety, lad, mair's the peety!" sighed Sir Hector. "But we'll no' let a bit quarrel stand betwixt us, man; I can fecht wi'oot any quarrel at a' when needfu'."

"We are here, sir," explained Mr. Sturton, "to arrest the notorious rogue and smuggler, George — "

"Ou aye, I ken that fine!" nodded Sir Hector. "An', O man, but this smugglin' 's an awfu' business, I'll no' deny. But Penelope Haryott bides here, y' ken, an' she's an auld body, stricken wi' years, an' auld folk lo'e peace an' quiet! So I'm juist suggestin' tae ye, Oxham, ma mannie, that ye gang awa' an' arrest your smuggler somewhaier else. Is it aye or no?"

"Aye, Sir Hector!" answered Mr. Oxham more sullenly than ever. "And us'll tell Lord Sayle o' this here business!"

"Good!" nodded Sir Hector, beginning in his most

pedantic English: "Pray carry him my compliments and inform him, on my behalf, that should he experience the burning need of a little gentlemanly satisfaction, Sir Hector MacLean will be happy to meet him at any time, anywhere, with broadsword or rapier, pistol, dirk, or half-pike, right hand or left, to suit his own convenience, and . . . aye, an' damn him intae the bargain for a scoondrel, whateffer! An' noo, tak' ye'sels hence — awa' wi' ye or I 'll be crackin' y'r twa thick heids taegither."

Thus stood Sir Hector, indeed a very Hector, Achilles and Ajax rolled into one, his two captives still in durance, his brow a little sad as he watched the enemy's retreat. Then, becoming aware of his helpless prisoners, he loosed them and patted each dazed fellow upon tousled crown.

"Losh," quoth he, "I fair disremembered ye! Rin awa', laddies, rin awa' an' dinna forget Hector Lauchlan MacLean."

And now it was that he felt a touch upon his arm and, turning, came face to face with my lady.

"Save 's a'," he exclaimed, "'t is Rose!"

"Herself, dear Sir Hector!" she answered and, smiling, reached him both her hands. But instead of clasping them, he clapped his own to his wigless head and stood utterly discomfited and abashed.

"Hoot-toot," quoth he, "I 'm no' a fit sicht for a lassie's een — look awa', Rose, look awa'! Rab!" he roared, "O Rabbie-man, bring me ma wig. Rin, laddie, rin!"

"Here, sir!" answered Robert, stepping from the shadow of the hedge with the object in question, which Sir Hector snatched and donned hastily; then, facing about, he bowed ceremoniously.

"Rose," said he, "I rejoice to see thee safe back."

"O Sir Hector," cried she, reaching him her hands again, "thou 'rt indeed a man 't is joy to see, a man of action, of deeds not words — and marvellous strong. You fight as if you loved it!"

Sir Hector's cheek flushed and his eye glistened.

"Yet ilka joy hath its sorrow, child!" he sighed. "Wull ye look at ma coat?"

"I vow it becomes you vastly, torn so!"

"Aye, but 't is my third best!" he answered gloomily. "An' though mebbe 't is somewhat worn an' weary wi' hard service an' length o' days, 't is an auld friend, y' ken!"

"Then do but bring thine old friend within doors and I 'll cobble him for thee," said my lady; and side by side they crossed the trampled garden to the cottage, while ex-Corporal Robert stared after them, rubbing his square chin thoughtfully. Then, being left thus to his own devices, he went back to her who stood awaiting him shyly in the shadow of the tall hedge.

## CHAPTER XXX

### In Which Sir John Receives a Warning

Sir John, watching the retreat of their discomfited assailants, and lost in admiration of Sir Hector's might and prowess, was roused by a touch, and beheld old Penelope, who, finger on lip, led him to a dark corner whence a narrow, precipitous stair mounted, up which she climbed, beckoning him to follow. Thus Sir John presently found himself in a small chamber bright with sun, the shattered panes of its wide lattice very neatly mended with oiled paper; and, glancing about, he marvelled within himself, for the place wore an air of refinement wholly unexpected, from the narrow carved bedstead to the few heavily framed pictures on the walls. And she herself seemed to have undergone some subtle change, for, when she spoke, her voice was less harsh and her dialect less pronounced:

"Here, young master, is where old Pen, the witch, sleeps a-nights, but very often lays awake an' has her truthful dreams and sees visions of what was, and is, and will be. For when all the world sleeps an' only she is waking because she so wills, then the thoughts of the sleepin' multitudes gather about her an' she sees an' knows an' has her dreams. So, sit ye down, young master — so! Now mark what I says! The Downs hereabouts be full o' souls, spirits o' folk as died long an' long ago; their bodies be dust, ages old, but their spirits do live — I can feel 'em arl about me when I tramp so far, the souls o' the Strange Folk as nobody remembers or knows aught about . . . there be pits where they lived an' graves where their dust lies buried . . . 't is the dust o' the unnumbered dead as goes to make the sweet grass, an' herbs, an' flowers . . . folk as lived an' loved an' died, ages agone, folk as did good and evil in their day, but the silent hills do keep arl their secrets fast hid — 'specially Windover!"

"Ah!" said Sir John softly, though his eyes grew suddenly keen. "Pray, why Windover?"

"Because 't is o' Windover as you 've been thinkin' so much."

"Faith and that 's true enough!" he answered.

"The Long Man o' Wilmington do ha' seen many a fearsome thing in his long length o' days, but he 'll never tell naun . . . there be a patch o' grass on Windover as hath been warmed wi' a man's life-blood ere now, but Windover 's always kep' the secret an' will do till the end o' time."

"You mean the cruel murder of Roger Hobden, I think?"

"Aye, I do."

"Then, Penelope, if you know any tittle of truth that may help discover his murderers, I beg you speak."

"His murderers, young sir?"

"Aye, there were three concerned in it, as I imagine, and yet 't is but imagination, for proof there is none . . . so if you know, or can aid me — "

"No," she cried fiercely — "no! And wherefore mix y'self in the black business — why?"

"For many reasons," he answered thoughtfully. "Mayhap because I am an idler and the matter puzzles me; mayhap because I think Justice hath been cheated too long, or mayhap because I have reasons to suspect — "

"Hush!" she cried. "Name no names! What I know I do know, but 't would n't be no good to your court lawyers; they would but laugh at an old woman's dreams. . . . But for yourself . . . ah, for yourself, young master, let be — let be, I tell 'ee!" And, reaching out suddenly, she seized his arm and shook it so that he wondered at the strength of her aged fingers. "Let be!" she repeated, her voice sinking to a pleading whisper. "The Downs hereaways has many secrets, an' who be you t' expect to learn what they bean't nowise willin' to tell? So ha' done, young sir, you bean't old enough to die yet awhile — "

"To die?" repeated Sir John, startled by her tone and the fixed intensity of her look.

"Die!" She nodded. "Them as seeks murderers seeks death, for Murder will murder to hide murder."

"And you think that in attempting to solve this mystery I run a certain danger, Penelope?"

"I know it!" she answered.

"None the less, I feel I must attempt it . . . the poor girl vanished, you 'll remember, and was never heard of more."

"An' never will be!"

"And," said he, frowning, "there may be other such hateful doings."

"For sure!" She nodded again. "Hundreds — thousands, 'til the world grows better!"

"Shall I succeed in this quest?"

"No!"

"Wherefore not, Penelope?"

"Because you 'll tak' up wi' a better thing!"

"What do you mean?"

"Love!"

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, and became thoughtful awhile. "Shall I succeed in my love, think ye?" he questioned at last.

"Only when Hope be dead."

"Penelope," said he, smiling as he leaned to touch her clasped hands, "how much of all this is pure guesswork?"

"Aye me," she sighed, "you be tur'ble like your father afore ye — "

"My" — Sir John sat up and blinked — "my father, say you?"

"Aye, sure," she sighed; "he would never believe, never be warned! Happen if he had — ah, if only he had, 't is like he would n't ha' died so young, away off in the cruel French wars, Sir John."

"You — you know me?" he stammered.

"Aye, indeed, Sir John!"

"When did you recognise me?"

"'T was when ye picked up my cabbage for me, sir."

"And how did you know?"

"Happen 't was y'r eyes . . . or a memory o' the years . . . or happen because o' my dreams, an' I . . . just knew."

Sir John, leaning back in his chair, viewed her with a new respect.

"Penelope," said he, "thou 'rt a strange and wonderful woman!"

"So they stone me, sir, an' call me 'witch'!"

"Aye," he sighed, "because the vulgar cannot love anything different to themselves. . . . And you knew my father?"

"In a better day, long an' long ago!" she answered, lifting her head proudly and holding his regard with her strangely bright old eyes. "He was a great and noble gentleman!" So saying, she rose suddenly, and, drawing a small key from her bosom, opened a drawer and took thence two miniatures, one of which she studied awhile with bowed head ere she handed it to Sir John; it was a thing of exquisite artistry, set within a gold frame; the picture of a manly face, square-chinned, firm-lipped, but with eyes soft and tender as a woman's.

"I never saw this picture of my father, Penelope."

"Nobody has!" she answered. And now she gave him the other picture, whose gold, strangely cut and battered, framed a face of extraordinary beauty — black-haired, deep-eyed, low-browed, full and vivid of mouth — the face of a girl passionate with life and eager youth, yet dominated by an expression of resolute strength and courage.

"Why, Penelope!" said he in awed voice — "O Penelope, this — this was yourself!"

"Aye, that was me," she answered; "'t was 'ow I looked long ago . . . when the world was younger an' kinder."

"And why is the case so battered? See, the gold is cut quite through in one place!"

"Aye, so it be!" said old Penelope very softly, and

stood with the miniature in her hand, turning it over and over in her bony fingers and on her face a light that was not wholly of the sun. Then, with a sudden gesture, she turned and locked the portraits away.

"Hark!" said she; "d'ye hear aught?" From somewhere beneath arose a fearsome puffing and blowing, accompanied by a ceaseless splashing. "That be Jarge Potter a-washin' hisself!" she explained. "Which do mean as him an' Sir Hector will be wantin' their hot grog; they never fancies tea."

"Penelope," said Sir John, "will you keep my identity secret a while longer?"

"Why, for sure, Mus' Derwent!" she answered, and then suddenly caught his hand, holding it fast while eyes and voice pleaded anew: "Let be, Sir John! Let blood answer blood, but keep you out of it. . . ."

"Nay, Penelope," he answered gently, "I would remind you that poor Roger Hobden was my horseboy years ago and taught me to steal apples —"

"And I bid ye let be!" she whispered passionately. "The evil as they wrought shall foller them as did it! What if they be never dragged to Justice, Roger will be avenged, one day. . . . I know it, so keep you clear o' them, sir, for your sake and your dead father's!"

Sir John was silent awhile then, stooping reverently, raised those old, work-roughened hands that clasped his so eagerly, and touched them with his lips.

"Oh!" she sighed; and feeling how she trembled, he looked up to see her eyes brimming with tears. "Ah, sir," she whispered, "'t is almost as I were young again an' the world a better place!"

"Pray heaven it shall be so!" he answered very gravely and, opening the door, followed her down the dark and narrow stair.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### Being a Chapter of No Great Consequence

My lady, seated between Sir Hector, very conscious of his shirt-sleeves, and Mr. Potter, fresh and assured of himself by reason of his late ablutions, held up the garment she had been mending, and viewed the result of her labours with coldly disparaging eye.

"I fear 't is very clumsily done, sir," said she.

"Nay, 'pon my soul," answered Sir Hector ponderously gallant, "I protest 't is of needlework the most excellent! My old coat will be endeared to me for the . . . the sake o' your bonny, white fingers! An' noo, gin ye 're finished wi 't, I 'll get in till 't, for 't is no juist proper tae sit here afore ye in my sark, ye ken. . . . Aha, Johnnie, is she no' a graund lassie, as apt wi' needle as wi' boilin' watter? A fine, sonsy lass — "

"Indeed," answered Sir John gravely, "she is as upstanding and down-sitting a wench as — "

"Tush!" cried my Lady Herminia, flushing. "There is your ill-cobbled coat, Sir Hector. And now, I 'll be going."

"Whaur to, lassie?"

"Home to my aunt, sir."

"Aunt?" repeated Sir Hector at a loss, "but 't was your grandmother last time, I mind."

"And to-day 't is my aunt, sir. And she a lone widow."

"Aunt? Widow?" quoth Sir Hector. "Why then, 't is no' for the sake o' a puir, auld, solitary, worn an' woefu' soldier-body wi' ane leg i' the grave as ye 're here, Rose? 'T is no' for the sake o' lonesome Hector MacLean, whateffer?"

"Indeed but it is, sir!" she smiled. "To cook and care, and tend and mend for him. I shall come and keep house for you every day."

"Aye, but your aunt, the widow-body — she 'll be the fly in the ointment, lassie —"

"Indeed and she 's no such thing, sir, as you shall see, for I mean to bring her with me sometimes."

"Hoot-toot — and she a widow? Na', na', lassie, I 'll be safer wi' Wully Tamson."

"Sir Hector MacLean," quoth my lady with her most determined air, "since you are such a very old, poor, solitary soldier-body, I intend to do my best for your future happiness . . . with my aunt's aid."

"Save 's a'!" gasped Sir Hector, "an' she a widow!"

"My aunt will, I hope, assist in my labour for your comfort and welfare."

"Aweel!" sighed Sir Hector, "I can run as fast as ony man. I 've braw, lang legs, y' ken."

"Though one of 'em is in the grave, sir!" she reminded him gravely. Here, at a sign from Penelope, my lady curtseyed demurely and followed the old woman out of the room.

"Losh!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "yon Rose hath an air aboot her that gi'es a cautious man tae think."

"Very much so!" answered Sir John. "As you once said, she is not exactly an ordinary lass."

"An' noo, Geordie man," said Sir Hector, lowering his voice, "'t was a mighty ill business yon, last nicht!"

"Why, I dunno, sir," answered Mr. Potter, stirring his grog thoughtfully, "we brought away every tub an' bale — arl safe stowed, they be."

"Aye, but the shooting, man, the bluidshed!"

"Naun so bad, sir — though poor Will Burgess took a musket-ball through 'is leg."

"An' the sojers, Geordie? Nine sojers an' twa o' the coastguard desp'ret wounded! O man, 't was awfu' . . . an' if ane o' them should dee . . . 't would be noose an' gibbet, y' ken!"

Mr. Potter smiled dreamily, and was his most guileless self as he answered:

"They wunt die, sir — nary a one on 'em! They 'll be

up an' about again by now — though salt be apt to sting, an' likewise smart a bit, d' ye see — "

"Salt?" exclaimed Sir Hector.

"Rock-salt, sir," nodded Mr. Potter placidly. "I charged arl our pieces wi' liddle lumps o' rock-salt as could n't 'ardly 'arm a babby noo-born."

"Thank God!" cried Sir Hector, fervently. "O Geordie man, I've hardly blinked an e'e the nicht for worry — and now — salt! Man, I fair admire at ye — salt! Geordie man, gi'e 's a grup o' ye hond!" And Sir Hector laughed suddenly and was immediately solemn again. "John an' Geordie," he continued, "when Dumbrell's Ann, thinkin' they meant harm to old Penelope, came running to fetch me hither, I was upon my knees wrestling in prayer that no lives should be spilled and none of the lads taken, for if so, I, being equally guilty, was determined to give myself up and suffer with 'em. And as I prayed, John and George, I cam' to the determination that I would be done wi' free-trading henceforth, whilk determination I mean to abide by — amen!"

"I be glad to hear it, sir!" nodded Mr. Potter. "You be too 'igh-strung for it, I rackon. Leave it to us as be born to it, same as our grandfeäthers was."

"And look 'ee, John an' Geordie, a' the siller I have had by it — aye, every penny, I have spent on good works, and all that remains is yon lugger the *True Believer*, and that, Geordie man, I 'm giving tae yourself!"

"What — what, me, sir?" gasped Mr. Potter, rising suddenly from his chair. "You . . . akerchally gimme the *True Believer*. . . . Me, Sir Hector?"

"Aye, I do, George. She 's yours, every plank and bolt, every rope and spar. . . . And here 's my hand on 't!"

"But," stammered Mr. Potter, hesitating, "but what o' Sharkie Nye, sir? My comrade Sharkie as ha' sailed her so bold an' true, blow fair or foul? What o' Sharkie?"

"Well, what o' him, man?"

"Why, I think, sir, if it be arl the same to you, I'd be

more 'appier in my mind-like if you made Sharkie my partner, sir, share an' share, your honour."

"Geordie Potter," quoth Sir Hector, "gi'e's your hand again. Your sentiments, George, do ye infinite honour, and I'm prood to ca' ye freend. . . . Forbye, ye're a rascally smugglin'-body an' law-breaker, Geordie, whilk as an elder an' respectable citizen I haud tae be an immoral an' damnable practice. Faith, George, 't is well to be free o' the sin that I may condemn it in others. But look 'ee, George, I hear that the man Sayle is like a mad-man after last nicht's business, and vows to take ye and make an example of ye, which means — well — "

"The gallers!" said Mr. Potter, reaching for his grog.

"Consequently, George, sic' influence as I possess — whilk is sma' — and a' my money — whilk is no' sae muckle as I could wish — I will joyfully adventure to get ye safe awa'! Our first conseederation must be tae get ye ower tae France."

"Aye, but wherefore France, sir?"

"Ye'll be safe there, man."

"Mebbe, sir, but I can't speak the lingo, d' ye see, an' I dunno as I like furrineers; 'sides, sir, I've made my plans to bide nice an' quiet in Alfriston — "

"But, ye muckle fule," cried Sir Hector, "ye ken the man Sayle means tae hunt ye doon?"

"Aye, I do, sir; this be why I'll bide along in Alfriston; poor Potter 'll be safest theer. Lord bless 'ee, there bean't a Sussex man, woman nor child as would give Potter away! An' there's plenty o' hiding-places I knaws on wheer nobody will never find poor Potter nowhen an' nohow — " Here Mr. Potter paused to drink as my lady reappeared; she, taking her leave forthwith, Sir John did the same, and together they stepped forth into the sunshine.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### Sir John Pursues His Wooing

Upon the Down a soft wind met them, a gentle breath sweet with wild thyme and fresh with ocean, a wind that touched them like a caress; insomuch that my lady removed hat and cap the better to feel it, and, sinking upon the smooth, turfy bank beside the path, sat to behold the beauties of teeming earth and radiant heaven, yet very conscious of him who stood beside her, wherefore she presently bade him be seated. Thus, side by side, they remained awhile, and never a word between them.

"Rose," said he at last, "most sweet and fragrant maid, thou canst be so nobly kind, so tender, so brave and womanly that there be times love doth so enthral me, I would thou hadst never known Herminia."

"Indeed, sir! And is Herminia so bitter, so hard, so cowardly, so altogether evil?"

"She is — Herminia!"

"And you," cried she, ablaze with sudden anger, "what are you, despite your foolish play-acting, but that same 'Wicked Dering' whose name is a byword — even here!"

"So it is, child, that I would be the good John Derwent a little longer, for thy sake and my sake. For as John Derwent I do so love thee, my Rose, I would John Dering had never been. In John Derwent is all John Dering's better self . . . to reverence thee with such a love that, yearning to possess thee, scarce dare touch thy hand." As he spoke, his voice took on a deeper note, his pale cheek flushed, and in his eyes shone a light she had never seen there before; and, beholding him thus moved, her breath quickened and she glanced away lest he should read the triumph in her face.

"Can such love truly be?" she asked softly.

"So long as thou art Rose," he answered.

"And what o' poor Herminia?"

"Do but love me, Rose, and I will strive to love her for thy dear sake."

"Will this be so hard a matter? Must you strive so extremely?" she questioned, and glanced at him over her shoulder, languorous-eyed, vivid lips upcurving, conscious of and assured in her beauty; and, reading this look, he laughed a little bitterly.

"O Coquetry!" he exclaimed, "that turn o' the neck and shoulder, that languishing droop o' the eyes become you vastly. . . . Egad, I protest you are monstrous bewitching so, my Lady Herminia!"

At this she flushed angrily and knit black brows at him.

"Faith, sir," she retorted, "by your vast knowledge o' feminine arts I perceive you to be merely Sir John Dering!"

"Who is extreme hungry!" he added. "And there doth await him a Sir Loin o' beef — hot! So, shall we go on, my lady?"

On they went accordingly, my lady with head proudly averted, and yet he knew her eyes were tearful, but, noting how passionately her white hand clenched itself, knew these for tears of anger only.

"Alas," sighed he at last, "to-day poor John Derwent's wooing doth not prosper, it seems. Love hath fled awhile on soaring pinions."

"I never hated you more!" said she in low, steady voice.

"Wouldst break thy John's heart, girl?"

To this she deigned no answer; but when he had repeated the question three or four times with as many different modulations, she broke out angrily:

"Aye, I would — I would, if ever I find it!"

"Couldst be so cruel, child?" he questioned lightly; and then, more seriously, "Could you stoop to such baseness? I wonder!"

"Nay," she retorted bitterly, "'t were impossible! You have no heart . . . never did have . . . never will!"

"And yet it beats for thee, Rose. Reach me thy hand and feel."

"Then 't is the heart of a stock-fish!" she cried. "Cold, cold — infinitely cold and sluggish!"

"Stock-fish!" he repeated mournfully — "O ye gods — a stock-fish! Alas, sweet soul, what strange mistake is here? A stock-fish. I that am by nature so ardent yet so humble, of impulses so kindly, of passions so fiery, of sentiments so very infinite tender! I that am thy predestined mate, thy man — "

"Aye, thou," she cried fiercely — "thou that art no more than a fine-gentlemanly thing as humble as Lucifer, as kindly as an east wind, as fiery as a lump of lead, as tender as that savage monster who nigh broke my wrists for me!"

"Gad 's my life, child," said he, noting her flashing eyes and glowing cheek, "thy so splendid theme endows thee with new splendour, thou handsome wench! Though thou dost sadly embarrass thy modest John — "

"Would I might, indeed!"

"But 't is very well thou shouldst justly appreciate me as well before as after marriage! And now, for thy poor, pretty wrists — "

"Why are you here, Sir John, wasting yourself in the country?" she demanded mockingly. "Your true place is that same heartless, selfish world o' modish idleness whence you came! What do you here among these kindly Sussex folk who, at the least, live to some purpose? Why are you here, you who live for no purpose but yourself?"

"Mayhap," he answered, "'t is because you once minded me o' the scabious flowers, child. See where they bloom all around us, sweet things! Do not tread too hastily, Herminia, lest you crush and end their blooming. Haste not so, for here is a stile for you to climb, and yonder, bosomed i' the green, is Alfriston spire."

"Aye, I thank heaven!" cried she.

"And wherefore thy so fervent gratitude, child?"

"To be rid of thy hated presence!"

"Ah, Rose," he sighed. "Alas, Herminia, how heavy thy foot is! See this poor flower you trample — 't is my heart!" And speaking, he stooped, put by her foot very gently, and plucked one of the scabious flowers she had trodden; fingering it tenderly, he placed it in her hand. "Take it, child!" he sighed; "cherish it for its own sweet sake. And for me and my so hated presence, I will deliver you, here and now. . . . But first, thy poor, pretty wrists? Show 'em to me!"

"No!" she answered; "never to you, Sir John!"

"Indeed, child, 't is thy Derwent pleadeth, thy John o' Gentleness. . . . Suffer me to see!" And, taking her hands, he lifted them whether she would or no.

"I see no wounds," quoth he, "nor mark or bruise; and yet who am I to judge the pretty things? And if they endured hurt, let this witness my sorrow." So saying, he stooped and kissed them tenderly. "Thus, sweet Rose, thy Derwent leaveth thee. Now, had I been the 'Wicked Dering' and thou the proud Lady Barrasdaile, it had been . . . thy hands, thine arms, thy lips . . . thy very self! And now, farewell awhile, my Rose o' love."

Saying which, Sir John bared his head, gave her his hand across the stile, and seating himself thereon watched her wistfully as she hurried away.

But, being hidden from his view, my lady paused to glance at her wrists, flushing as though she felt his lips there yet; and finding she still held his scabious flower, tossed it angrily away, but, marking where it fell, took it up again, and having throned it amid the laces of her bodice, went her way, slow of foot and with eyes a-dream.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### Which, Among Other Small Matters, Telleth of a Snuff-Box

And now ensued days wherein Sir John seemingly idled, the Corporal took mysterious journeys both ahorse and afoot, and my Lady Herminia busied herself upon Sir Hector's comfort; for, having visited his cottage and being horrified by his ideas of "homeliness," she prepared for immediate action — that is to say, with lovely head tied up in a kerchief (laced cap, ringlets and all) against such accidentals as spiders, cobwebs and dust, she armed herself with a mop and Mr. William Thompson with soap, water and scrubbing-brush, and forthwith set about cleansing the Augean stables.

Accoutred thus, she was directing the floor-washing operations of Mr. Thompson in the small, tiled kitchen when Sir Hector ventured to open the door, whereupon Mr. Thompson, hitherto awed to dumb submission by my lady's imperious presence, cast down his scrubbing-brush and lifted his voice in wailing protest:

"Sir 'Ector — O Sir 'Ector, will 'ee look at oi! She's 'ad me 'ere on my knees, a-scrubbin' an' a-sloshin', this hower an' more, she 'ave! On me marrer-bones, sir! Crool it be! Sir 'Ector, if you 'ave an 'eart, say a word for oi!"

"William Thompson," quoth my lady, "William Thompson — scrub."

"Sir 'Ector — say a word!"

"Losh, Wully man, whaur'll be the use? Ye ken verra weel 't is no fau't o' mine. Ye ken verra weel I lo'e tae be hamely — "

"Sir Hector — silence!" commanded my lady.

"Eh, but, Rose, puir Wully an' me are no used tae sic awfu' — "

"Enough, sir!"

"But, O lassie, ye're fair washin' me oot o' hoose an' hame—"

"Then begone, sir, and leave us to finish."

"But Guid save us a', d' ye no—"

"Sir Hector," cried my lady with a flourish of her mop, "go!"

Sir Hector went. Being in his small parlour, he glanced yearningly upon the unwashed crockery littering the table, from this to the dusty riding-boots upon the mantel-shelf and, sweeping a heterogeneous collection of small oddments from the elbow-chair to the floor, sat down with his feet among the long-dead ashes that cumbered the hearth, sighing for that spirit of homely comfort that was, even then, being washed and swept out of his ken.

And thus Sir John found him, a desolate soul, huddled disconsolately over a cheerless hearth, his peruke over one mournful eye, the very picture of woe.

"Hark till her, John!" quoth he dolefully. "O man, 't is fair heartrendin'! Hark till yon brushin' an' scrubbin'!"

"Ah, so you have a woman to clean the place for you at last, Hector!"

"A wumman, d' ye say? Man, she's no' an ordinary wumman. . . . Wull ye hark till her!"

"William Thompson," cried a sweet, albeit stern voice, "this corner is not even wetted . . . scrub it!"

"Rose!" exclaimed Sir John.

"Hersel'!" sighed Sir Hector. "Can ye no reason wi' her, John, if 't is only for the sake o' puir Wully Tamson?"

"Not for worlds, Hector!"

"Then what 'll I dae, Johnny?"

"Come a-walking."

"Na', na'; I 've no' the sperrit, John."

"But you 've the legs, Hector." So saying, Sir John straightened his old friend's wig, reached him his hat and, taking his arm, led him out into the sunshine.

"Whaur awa', Johnny?"

"Well, I promised to visit Mr. Pym, the painter."

"Aye, I ken him fine; wi' rod or gun there's nane to equal him."

They found Mr. Pym busied in his garden, who, perceiving his visitors, laid by his spade and hastened to make them welcome; the better to perform which, he brought them into the house and vanished to find the wherewithal to refresh them, only to return empty-handed and disconsolate:

"Sirs," quoth he, "the devil is in it for my brandy is out!" And, being at a loss, he sought the aid of his daughter. "Elsie!" he called; "Elsie!"

A jingle of keys, a light step and Mistress Pym appeared, her dainty, print gown girt about slender middle by a cincture whence hung reticule and housewifely keys, her face framed in snowy mob-cap and remarkable for a pair of handsome eyes.

"Girl," exclaimed the painter, "my brandy's out!"

Mistress Pym faced the so grave situation entirely undismayed:

"I told you 'twas so, days agone, sir," she answered serenely. "We've nought left in the house save my ginger wine."

"Then that must serve," quoth her sire. "Bring it, a heaven's name!"

Lightly she went and lightly she was back and, steady of hand, filled the three glasses. Sir John eyed the liquor a little askance but tasted it bravely, and glanced at his young hostess.

"Your own making, Mistress Pym?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," she nodded. "'Twould be better were it older, but father never lets it keep long enough."

"And small wonder!" answered Sir John, bowing. "Mistress Pym, I drink to your eyes, for sure there be few to match 'em in the South Country." So saying, he drank and wished his glass had been larger. Thereupon Mistress Pym curtseyed to them and jingled away about her multifarious duties.

"Yon 's a braw wife for some lucky man, I 'm thinkin'!" quoth Sir Hector. "There 's looks till her, an', O man, but she 's a bonny cook whateffer! 'T is a graund thing when a lass can appeal tae a man's heid, an' heart, an' stomach, y' ken."

"Mr. Pym," said Sir John as, the ginger wine having made a duly deliberate end, they rose to depart, "you mentioned, I mind, the first time we met, the murder of a man on Windover."

"I did, sir; the cruel assassination of Roger Hobden — a black business that was never cleared up and never will be."

"Had you any suspicions at the time?"

"Suspicions, sir? Remembering Lord Sayle and the unholy doings in that solitary house of his, I suspected every one beneath its roof, from Lord Sayle down."

"Losh, man!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "ye 've a graund gift o' suspeecioning."

"And suppose I have, sir?" demanded the painter argumentatively. "There is little of good in 'Friston Manor, and evil begetteth evil. And Sayle is a law unto himself, with bullies at hand to work his wicked purposes."

"Whisht, man!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "ye 'll no be suggestin' —"

"And why not, sir? Doth the man's rank place him above suspicion?"

"Never heed father, Sir Hector," said Mistress Pym at this moment, leaning in at the open door; "he doth but seek an argument —"

"Mistress!" quoth the painter, "mind your business!" Whereat Mistress Pym laughed and jingled away again.

"Pym — man," said Sir Hector, "his lordship is no juist an archangel nor yet a seraphim, but ye 'll no' be suspectin' a man o' his quality wad stoop tae murder a country lad o' no condition."

"On the contrary, Sir Hector, I say he would stoop to anything."

"There was never any incriminating evidence found,

I believe, sir?" inquired Sir John. "No clue of any kind discovered?"

"None of importance. Though I did find a thing on the footpath that runs above the 'Long Man,' near where the crime was committed — a thing I felt it my duty to show to the law officers and was laughed at for my pains. . . . I have it here somewhere." And the painter turned to a small, carved press in a corner where stood two or three fishing-rods in company with a musket and a birding-piece.

"What kind o' thing, Pym?" inquired Sir Hector.

"A snuff-box," answered the painter, opening a drawer and turning over a collection of small fossils, flint arrow-heads, and the like.

"A gowd snuff-box, Pym?"

"Nay, 't was of horn — a poor thing! Ah, here 't is!" And he held out a clumsy horn snuff-box of battered and villainous appearance. Sir John took it, turned it this way and that, opened and sniffed delicately at its empty interior, and finally carrying it to the light, fell to studying it anew.

"Now, Pym man," said Sir Hector, "if yon had been gold or enamel, or even siller, it might perchance justify your suspeecions; but whaur 's the man o' quality would carry a thing the like o' that?"

"There, sir," answered the painter dogmatically, "there I take issue with ye. If that box be evidence, which I deny, mark ye — 't is precisely the kind o' thing your man o' quality would purposefully leave that its very poverty might set inquiring minds on a false scent. I further maintain, sir, that — "

"Nay, Sir Hector," laughed Mistress Pym, leaning in at the open lattice at this moment, her hands full of fresh-gathered flowers, "do but take father's side o' the question and he will immediately take yours to keep the argument a-going."

"Child!" quoth the painter, sternly grim, "I smell your bread a-burning!"

"Sir," she answered, throwing a flower at him, "thou 'rt mighty sharp-nosed this morning, for 't is not yet in the oven!"

"An' there 's for ye, man!" chuckled Sir Hector as she jingled away once more.

"Mr. Pym, would you pray lend me this box for a few days?" inquired Sir John.

"Nay, take it, sir," answered the painter, "if the sorry thing hath any interest for you, take it and welcome."

Murmuring his thanks, Sir John slipped it into his pocket; and shortly after, bidding Mr. Pym adieu, they left him to his gardening.

"Yon Pym-lassie," quoth Sir Hector as they walked, "is like a bagpipes —"

"Never in the world, Hector!"

"Aye, John; she 's sweet as a bagpipes, whilk, as a' the warld kens, is the sweetest and maist soothin' of a' instruments! 'T is a muckle woefu' wight Pym 'll be if ever she marries, I 'm thinkin'! But, Johnnie, why for did ye want yon snuff-box?"

"Because I think I can find the man who lost it."

"Losh, man! An' suppose ye can, what then?"

"Why then, Hector, I think my Lord Sayle will cease from hunting smugglers."

"Eh? Sayle? Man, what d' ye mean?"

"Time will show —"

"Aye, but meanwhile, John, d' ye mean to say ye think —"

"That a mug of Mr. Bunkle's gumboo will go very happily with Mistress Pym's excellent wine, so —"

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector; and together they entered the hospitable portal of the Market Cross Inn, where they were met by the cheery Mr. Bunkle, who ushered them as honoured guests into his five-doored holy of holies.

"Do you gin'men 'appen to ha' seed the bill as they 've printed an' posted arl-on-account-o' pore Jarge Potter? What — no, sirs? Then bide a minute an' I 'll show ye

one o' they bills." Saying which, Mr. Bunkle put aside snowy apron and from vasty pocket drew forth such incongruous articles as: a whip lash, a fragment of tobacco, a nutmeg, a small pistol, and finally, after laborious groping, a folded paper which, having carefully smoothed out, he held up against the wall and they read as follows:

ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD.
Dead or Alive.

WHEREAS George Potter a NOTORIOUS SMUGGLER did upon the 10th inst. of June fire upon certain of His Majesty's soldiers and coastguard officers in the execution of their duty, thereby MALICIOUSLY WOUNDING divers of them: the above sum, to wit ONE HUNDRED POUNDS, will be paid to any or such persons as shall give information leading to capture of the aforesaid

NOTORIOUS MALEFACTOR.
Dead or Alive.
LONG LIVE THE KING.

"Save's a'!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "the man Sayle is unco' serious an' damnably determined. . . . A hundred pounds! Losh, man, 't will be an awfu' temptation tae the avereecious. How think ye, Peter?"

"Why, I think, sir, as that theer hundred pound will go a-beggin'—"

"But . . . a hundred pounds, man—!"

"Aye," nodded Mr. Bunkle as he refolded the bill, "'t is a sight o' money, I rackon; Jarge ought to be a proud man this day! 'Twill be the gumboo as usual, sirs?"

Now when their glasses were empty and Sir Hector had fared unwillingly homewards, Sir John, being alone, took out the battered snuff-box to view it once again in keen-eyed scrutiny, more especially the lid; for there, scratched faintly on the horn, were these two initials:

J. S.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### Concerns Itself with One of the Many Mysteries of the Market Cross Inn

In these sleepy summer days, while Alfriston drowsed about its business, High Dering opened doors and lattices far wider than usual to behold a troop of workmen who, with planks, poles, ladders and other paraphernalia, descended upon Dame Haryott's little cottage.

These workmen, though Londoners and therefore "foreigners" in Sussex, to be watched suspiciously and askance, were nevertheless cheery souls who whistled and sang and cracked jokes with old Penelope what time they thatched and glazed and painted. In the midst of which business down came Mr. Sturton bristling with outraged authority, who loudly demanded to know by what right and by whose permission they dared thus violate the dignity of rotting thatch and sanctity of decaying wall; whereupon he was shown a paper signed by a certain name that caused him to open his eyes very wide and close his mouth very tight and walk away vastly thoughtful.

My Lord Sayle also, though never stirring abroad, was by no means inactive, nay, rather his zeal for the suppression of smugglers in general and capture of one in particular, waxed to a fervour which was presently manifest to all and sundry, more especially the highly virtuous inhabitants of Alfriston, the quiet of whose sleepy High Street was frequently scandalised by the tramp of soldiery, hoarse commands and the clatter of accoutrements; at which times, and with passionless regularity, Mr. George Potter's cottage would be searched from cellar to attic and its walls and floors sounded without avail. Thereafter Mr. Bunkle, awaiting patiently expectant, would conduct the unsuccessful search-

party over the Market Cross Inn; would himself show them all manner of possible hiding-places as: dark corners, deep cupboards, hidden recesses all more or less dusty and cobwebby; he was, indeed, never too busy to assist officer, sergeant or private in their floor and wall-tapping operations, and would suggest for their further consideration an infinity of likely and unlikely places as his barns, stables, lofts and outhouses, his corn-bins, even his hen-roost and dog-kennel; until officer, sergeant and private, very dusty, very hot and ever and always thirstily unsuccessful, would end their labours in parlour and tap-room and, having nobly refreshed themselves, would fall in and march away, conscious of having performed their duty like men.

At which times the weatherbeaten old Cross, wise with years, might have winked knowing eye had it possessed one, as did Mr. Bunkle upon a certain evening in the chaste seclusion of the five-doored room.

"Are they gone, Peter man?" inquired Sir Hector.

"Certain sure, indeed, sir, an' arl on 'em quite as 'appy as usual."

"This being their second visit within the week?" inquired Sir John, busied with pencil and memorandum.

"It be, sir!" nodded Mr. Bunkle, slicing a lemon. "They sojers be 'ard-workin' lads, sure-lye! This be the fourth time they've turned that 'ay for me as I've got a-laying in the old barn — which be good for the 'ay an' doan't do them no 'arm. An' seekin' an' searchin' for some one as be never found seems a tur'ble thirsty business — which be likewise good for me!"

Here ensued a silence wherein Sir John made notes in his memorandum and Mr. Bunkle proceeded to concoct that mystery known as "gumboo," while Sir Hector, puffing his pipe, watched with great and appreciative expectation.

From adjacent tap-room issued the drowsy murmur of neighbourly talk, the clank of pewter, an occasional laugh; but all at once this pleasant clamour was hushed,

and Mr. Bunkle, in the act of filling the glasses, paused and stood glancing obliquely towards the open lattice, for upon this unnatural stillness grew an ominous sound, faint at first but swelling ever louder, wilder, more threatening.

Sir Hector rose, Sir John closed his memorandum, Mr. Bunkle leant from the window, for now above this ominous sound rose another, the clatter of running feet in desperate flight from the oncoming terror of the "hue and cry."

And then the small chamber seemed full of men who muttered uneasily to each other.

"The sojers, Peter!" quoth Mr. Muddle. "'T is the sojers a-comin' back again!"

"'T is Jarge!" added Mr. Pursglove dolefully. "'T is pore Jarge Potter . . . runnin' fur 'is loife. . . . An' us caan't do nowt fur 'ee —" Even as he spoke was the sound of a distant shot.

"Not 'ere, ye caan't!" answered Mr. Bunkle, shaking his head. "So off wi' ye, lads!"

Hereupon the five doors opened, closed, and the three were alone again.

"Peter Bunkle," cried Sir Hector, "Peter — man, though a' the warld kens I 'm no smuggler the noo, yet if Geordie Potter 's taken they shall tak' me too!"

"Nay, Sir Hector, what 'll be the good o' that?" demurred Mr. Bunkle, following him out into the tap-room.

"Whisht, man — hark 'ee!"

The running feet were much closer now; on they came in wild career, though every now and then they seemed to falter oddly.

"B' the Powers — 'e 'll never do it!" cried Mr. Bunkle. "'Ark 'ow 'e runs — he 'm wounded!"

"Why, then," exclaimed Sir Hector, and swung open the door, and leapt aside as a man blundered past him, a woeful figure, torn, mired and bloody, who gasped painfully and reeled in his stride.

Forthwith Sir Hector clapped to the door, and would have barred it, but Mr. Bunkle stayed him.

"No, no, sir!" he cried. "It looks more innocenter open an', besides, Jarge only wants a minute . . . watch 'im!"

Upon the wide hearth a fire smouldered, and into and over this fire Mr. Potter staggered; they heard the rattle of a chain within the chimney, a breathless, "Arl roight, Peter!" and Mr. Potter vanished amid sparks and smoke.

A moment later the first of his pursuers, lifting musket-butt to batter the stout door, found it ajar and entered, panting, to behold two gentlemen seated in amicable converse upon the wide settle, and Mr. Bunkle deferentially awaiting their orders; whereupon the soldier gasped and, gaping, was thrust aside by a panting officer, a ferocious gentleman, plump, peevish and blown, who, perceiving this picture of placid ease, immediately gaped also.

"Why . . . why, what the devil!" he gasped, staring about the orderly tap-room in round-eyed amazement, while his breathless subordinates peered over his shoulders; and, finding no better expression to fit the occasion, he repeated it, louder than before, "What the devil!"

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Sir John, viewing the breathless gentleman in mild wonder. "Mr. Bunkle, you may bring us some o' your famous gumboo."

"Well . . . damme!" panted the officer.

"Aye, but why, sir?" inquired Sir John, whereat the officer grew a trifle redder in the face and, scowling upon Sir John, fell back upon his original remark:

"What the devil!"

"My dear sir," quoth Sir John, "not being an army man myself, I am consequently a little at a loss, and should be glad to know precisely what evolution, manœuvre or exercise you and your comrades are engaged upon?"

The officer blinked, stared about him dazedly, and scowled upon Sir John blacker than ever.

"Sir," said he, having somewhat recovered his breath,

"I am Panter o' the Third! Captain Panter, sir, and am here in pursuit o' the notorious smuggler, George Potter, who entered this doorway not two minutes ago."

"Amazing!" murmured Sir John, shaking his head. "Hector, you hear what Captain Panter says?"

"Aye, I hear," answered Sir Hector, staring at the Captain and shaking his head also. "'T is fair astonishin', John!"

"Why, what d' ye mean, sir?" demanded the Captain angrily. "What the devil d' ye mean? I 've got eyes, and I saw our man run through this doorway, damme!"

"Mebbe 't is the sun, Johnnie?" Sir Hector suggested. "An' sunstroke 's an awfu' thing, y' ken, 't is bad as strong drink tae mak' a man see visions —"

"Visions, sir!" cried Captain Panter, "to the devil with your visions, sir! You, Ensign Page, did we see our man run in here or no?"

"Most certainly we did, sir!"

"And you, Sergeant, did we or did we not?"

"Why, sir," answered the Sergeant, saluting, "we did; leastways you did, but I did n't — that is, not pre-zackly as I could swear to . . . me not being capable o' seein' nothin' but the stock o' Private Adamses musket as, owin' to Private Adamses windictiveness, 'ad caught me in the ab-domen, sir, doublin' of me up like a jack-knife and renderin' me —"

"Damme!" roared the Captain, stamping with fury, "will ye hold your infernal tongue! Page, take ten men and search this cursed inn all over again . . . the fireplace yonder first!"

The embers were scattered immediately and two zealous soldiers, ducking under the arch of the mantel, stood in the wide chimney to peer, to prod with bayonets, to pound with musket-butts until they sneezed, choked and reappeared coughing and black with fallen soot, to the suppressed delight of their comrades and the furious chagrin of their Captain, who promptly cursed them forth to their instant ablutions.

"Sergeant," he cried, "surround this damned tavern and let nobody out or in, d' ye hear?"

"Aye, I do, sir," answered the Sergeant, saluting, "any person so attempting to be—"

"Be off!" roared the Captain.

"Aye, sir. And if fugitive discovers hisself, we to shoot at same with intent to—"

"Aye—shoot and be dammed!"

"Yes, sir!" answered the Sergeant, and with another salute he wheeled smartly, strode into the street, bellowed incoherencies at his perspiring men and marched them away to their stations.

"You, landlord," quoth Captain Panter, seating himself and stretching dusty legs, "bring me a bottle o' burgundy—now, at once! And as for the rest o' ye, I'll let you know I'm Panter o' the Third and not to be gammoned by a tale o' cock and bull!"

The wine being brought, Captain Panter filled and drank thirstily while the place rang and reverberated with the tread of heavy feet and thuds of musket-butts that marked the searchers' activity.

"O John," said Sir Hector, after some while, "wull ye hearken tae yon noble heroes! Is it no a graund thing tae be a sojer?"

At this, the Captain set down his glass with a bang. Quoth he:

"I'll thank ye to leave my profession alone!"

"I will that!" answered Sir Hector. "I've no' juist hankered tae be a catchpoll, y' ken."

"Catch—" the Captain choked.

"Poll!" added Sir Hector. "Catchpoll, laddie—"

"By all the devils!" exclaimed the Captain, rising, but at this moment Ensign Page re-entered, dusty and dishevelled.

"Sir," said he, casting looks of yearning upon the Captain's bottle, "I beg to report that we have searched everywhere to no effect."

"But, burn me," exclaimed the Captain, "the rascal

must be here! You saw him enter that door, we all saw him, and he's had no time to win clear . . . besides, the place is surrounded."

"Nevertheless, sir," answered Ensign Page, still eyeing the bottle thirstily, "there's never a sign of him high nor low."

"And I say he's here somewhere, hid. Where ha' you looked?"

"In all the usual places, sir."

"Then go search the unusual places!"

"Sir?"

"I say," fumed the Captain, "that the rogue must be here somewhere, and if he's here, here he shall be found. . . . Go, find him, sir!"

The young Ensign saluted the bottle and departed. So was a new series of thumps and bangs and tramplings alow and aloft, what time the autocratic Captain Panter sipped his wine and glared at the occupants of the settle who seemed so very much at their ease; and, as the wine grew low, his choler rose correspondingly. He viewed Sir Hector's shabby garments, Sir John's plain attire, and setting them down as persons of no condition, treated them as such.

"Sunstroke!" he snarled. "Sunstroke, begad! 'T is very evident ye 're aiding and abetting this rascally smuggler — both o' ye! Could I but be assured o' this, I 'd march ye to prison, aye, I would, by Jove! B'gad, but you may be arrant smugglers yourselves — you 've the cursed, sly look of 't."

"Laddie," answered Sir Hector mildly, "what wi' sunstroke an' the bottle, ye 're no juist reesponsible for the clatter o' your feckless tongue — "

"Tongue, sir, tongue? D' ye dare suggest I 'm not perfectly sober?"

"Aye, I dare that!" nodded Sir Hector; "I dare suggest that what wi' sun an' the bottle ye 'll be seein' smugglers crawlin' up y'r arrms an' legs gin ye drink ony mair. . . . Man, ye 're growin' purple i' the face, y'r

eyne be rollin' in y'r heid, an' ye look sae uncanny an' talk sae — "

"Talk, is it — talk!" roared the Captain, shaking his fist. "At the least I talk English and you, like the bog-trotting Irishman y'are, and be — "

Uttering an inarticulate roar, Sir Hector leapt from his chair, bounded across the room and Captain Panter of the Third found himself whirled aloft in mighty hands that held him pinned fast between two of the ceiling-beams, breathless, shaken and utterly confounded.

"O man," quoth Sir Hector in bitter apostrophe, "can ye no' ken a Scot when ye see him? Ye muckle fule, can ye no' see the differ' betwixt a Scot an' the lave o' puir humanity? D'ye no' ken that the Scots be the salt o' the airth? An', O man, I'm a Scot o' the Scots, being Hector Lauchlan MacLean o' Duart. Ma puir wee mannie, I've ate things the like o' yesel' in a sallet afore to-day an' ne'er kenned it!"

Having thus delivered himself, Sir Hector set the dazed and breathless Captain gently upon his feet, a very astonished officer, who gulped, stared and was fumbling in a numb sort of fashion for the hilt of his sword, when the young Ensign reappeared once more, more dusty and heated than ever.

"Sir," said he, "we've seen neither hide nor hair of our man though we've turned the place upside down."

Captain Panter stared vaguely at the speaker, and from him to a certain spot between the beams above his head.

"Upside . . . down!" he murmured. "Oh! Ah! Fall in your men!" Having said which, the Captain walked slowly out of the inn, looking neither right nor left.

And presently the Sergeant's voice was heard uplifted in divers inarticulate roarings; followed a ring and clatter of muskets and, with martial swing and measured tramp, Captain Panter and his dusty company marched away through the mellowing afternoon sunshine.

And, after some while, appeared Mr. Muddle's head at the open lattice.

"Arl clear, Peter!" he announced, whereupon Mr. Bunkle nodded and emitted a cheery whistle, which was immediately answered by those ghostly rappings, such as Sir John remembered to have heard once before.

"Aweel, that's over, God be thankit!" quoth Sir Hector fervently.

"Aye, sir!" nodded Mr. Bunkle. "'Twere a bit orkard-like for Jarge, but then every summer 'as its rainy day!"

The rattle of a chain, a scufflin' sound in the chimney, and Mr. Potter stepped forth in more woeful plight than ever by reason of soot.

"Havers, Geordie man, an' how are ye the noo?" inquired Sir Hector. "Are ye wounded?"

"A bit, sir — 'ere an' theer," admitted Mr. Potter, "by reason of a quick-set as happed in my road. But gimme a glass o' grog, chilled, Peter, an' soap an' water, an' I'll be never naun the worse, I rackon." And, making a leg, he limped away on Mr. Bunkle's ready arm.

"A memorable afternoon, Hector!" quoth Sir John. "In Sussex one truly lives these days! Paris? London? What be these to Alfriston? And now, come your ways."

"Whaur awa', John?"

"To visit Rose's aunt."

"Na, na, John. D'ye no' ken she's a widow? Forbye, she's a wee person, an' none sae ill-lookin' —"

"You have seen her, then?"

"Glimpsed her, lad, from ayont the party wall. She's my neighbour, y' ken."

"Why, then, come and meet her."

"An' her a widow-body, an' me new shaved!"

"Shaved, Hector?"

"Aye! When fresh shaved I'm no' sae ill-lookin' mysel', d'ye see, John. An' I was ever a cautious body, as ye ken weel. So I'll juist bide here an' smoke a pipe wi' Geordie Potter. . . . But, John" — and here Sir

Hector's English became precise — "there is a matter hath troubled me this week and more. John, she is a sweet, good maid, though mayhap a little overbearing now and then, and much above her condition."

"Meaning Rose?"

"Herself, John . . . you — you see her very often of late. . . . And, minding her station in life and yours, I would ask ye, John, as one who loves you and respects yon maid, are you . . . making love to her?"

"As often as possible, Hector!"

"As John Derwent?"

"Yes, Hector."

"O John . . . O Johnnie lad! Can ye no leave purity and innocence alone?"

"Not when I want 'em in a wife."

"Wife!" ejaculated Sir Hector, falling back a step in sheer amazement — "wife, is it? You — you with a wife, John?"

"In time, I hope."

"Losh, Johnnie man! And here was I thinking — "

"Evil of me, Hector. My reputation dogs me even yet!"

"Forgi'e me, lad, forgi'e me! And . . . O John, you would actually marry a — a serving-wench — you?"

"I!"

"And by heaven, I honour ye for 't! Doth she love ye?"

"Well, Hector, there are times when I am gravely doubtful . . . yesterday, for instance, she called me 'John' for the first time!"

"An' blushed when she said it, lad?"

"Like a rose, Hector!"

"'T was a good sign, sure?"

"Aye — in any maid but Rose. Thus when Rose, blushing rosily as Rose should, calleth me 'John,' my assurance shakes and I grow doubtful."

"But can ye no' find out, John?"

"Aye — her aunt might tell me!" So saying, he

turned and went his thoughtful way, leaving Sir Hector staring after him in deepest perplexity.

Her Grace the Duchess of Connington was seated in her little garden busily shelling peas.

"Ah, and is it you — at last, sir?" quoth she, acknowledging Sir John's profound obeisance with a smiling nod. "Pray, why ha' you been so long a-calling?"

"I awaited vainly your niece's invitation, madam, and am here to-day unbidden."

"Then you may sit here beside me, sir. . . . I ha' been hither dragged into these solitudes by my headstrong Herminia and, on the whole, should like it vastly well were it not for the giant."

"Giant, madam?"

"Aye, Blunderbore himself, sir! A fierce, fearsome, great creature in shabbiest clothes and matted wig! An odious, huge person who persistently peers and prys upon me — over the wall yonder. So slinking and sly! A contemptible creeper! And puffs tobacco from a pipe!"

"Nay, madam, can you possibly mean my very dear friend, Sir Hector MacLean, a most honourable, worthy gentleman!"

"Then why should the person persistently pry and peer on our privacy, pray?"

"'T is, I am sure, with no will to offend. Believe me, he is of nature the most gentle — "

"With the looks of an ogre, sir!"

"But, indeed, Duchess — "

"Hush, Sir John! In Alfriston pray remember I am Mrs. Saunders!"

"And I, madam, am John Derwent."

"And pray, John Derwent, what is the part you play here 'mid the rustic wild?"

"Madam, I am principal lover to Mrs. Saunders' niece Rose."

"A difficult rôle, sir!" answered the little Duchess, with her youthful laugh.

"Indeed, 't would seem so," he answered a little

ruefully. "And 't is thus I am here, humbly seeking your advice, dear Mrs. Saunders."

"Nay, fie, sir! Is not Sir John Dering accounted wholly irresistible, a wild and winning wooer, terribly tempestuous?"

"Only by idle gossip, madam. And John Derwent is the reverse of all this — a very patient lover he, full o' reverent humility."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Duchess, and shelled three peas with rapid dexterity, which done, she glanced at Sir John with her shrewd, pretty eyes, and shook her small head decidedly. "Alas, my poor John, your reverent humility shall never win Herminia!"

Now at this moment, Chance, Instinct or some even finer sense, caused Sir John to glance up at the adjacent wall in time to see the gleam of a white hand among the ivy that surmounted the coping; thus, when he answered, his voice was a thought louder than before:

"But, dear Mrs. Saunders, 't is Rose and Rose only that I do so love for — "

"Stay, sir! Pray remember that Rose being Rose is yet always and ever Herminia!"

"And yet, madam, how utterly dissimilar, how vastly different! Betwixt the sweet simplicity of my gentle Rose and the cold worldliness of the arrogant Herminia, a great gulf is fixed that none may bridge saving only — Herminia. And so it is I fear."

"For yourself?"

"For us both. I fear lest Herminia's selfish pride bring lasting misery to poor Rose and John."

"Ha!" exclaimed the little Duchess again, and sat turning a pea-pod idly in her small fingers. "And yet, Herminia hath a noble heart, a warmly generous nature . . . though the sweet soul can be a fierce, passionate wretch. . . . But, alack, John, she never knew a mother's fostering care . . . she was spoiled, petted and pampered and became the idol of her wild and reckless father. . . . Aye me! . . . John Derwent, look at me and show

me John Dering's heart. Do you indeed so love—Rose?"

"Beyond all expression!" he answered, looking into the eyes that questioned his so keenly.

"Why, then, John," said she at last, "were I in thy place, I should forget John Derwent's so great humility awhile—just . . . for a moment!"

"A moment?"

"Well, say two moments, John . . . or even three! . . . O Sir John Dering, art grown so strangely dense?"

Then Sir John rose.

"A moment," he repeated, "two moments, or even three!" Taking Her Grace's two small hands, he kissed them rapturously. "Thou dear, kind friend," quoth he, "thy trust, thy faith in 'the poor dog with a bad name' shall, methinks, resolve all my difficulties. . . . It shall be three! At the stile beyond the little footbridge."

## CHAPTER XXXV

### Being the Shortest in This Book

Sunset had long since paled its splendour; evening was fading into night, a warm and languorous twilight where stars peeped and a waxing radiance gave promise of a moon, while from wood remote, vague, mysterious stole the bubbling murmur of a night-jar.

And my Lady Herminia, having crossed the little footbridge that spanned whispering stream, paused to lean upon the adjacent stile, viewing all things tender-eyed, from the homely lights of Alfriston, twinkling here and there beyond dim-seen trees, to the far-flung majesty of the swelling, silent Downs beyond. Yet, it is to be supposed, she was by no means unconscious of him who stood beside her, though she started when at last he spoke.

"This," said Sir John, "is the stile beyond the little footbridge."

"Well?" she inquired, a little breathlessly.

"Won't you say 'John'?"

"Well, John?" she repeated obediently.

"And it is an aged stile, Rose. See how warped are its timbers. And consequently 't is very like that many a man hath kissed his maid here. . . . Say 'Yes, John.'"

"Yes, John."

"And yet, Rose, as I do think, none of them all ever kissed with such reverent fervour as we are about to do. . . . Say 'Never in all the world, John!'"

"Nay . . . oh, wait!" she cried more breathlessly than ever.

"Indeed, I am in no haste," he answered. "But here to-night, Rose, thou and I that so love each other, do plight our troth. . . ."

"Art sure I love thee, then?" she questioned.

"'T is so I have dared dream, child."

"And how if I — do not?"

"Then is the sun out and I lost i' the dark."

"Art so — very assured?" she questioned again; and then his arms were about her and he drew her close, lifting her unwilling head that he might look into her eyes.

"O loved maid!" he murmured, "Sweet Flower o' Life, thou and I are alone here with the God that made us and yon everlasting hills. . . . Could thine eyes speak me aught but truth? Are these the eyes of Rose or the Lady Herminia?"

"Of . . . Rose!" she whispered. And so he kissed her, her eyes, her hair, her lips, until at last: "O John," she murmured, "art thou John Derwent or . . . the 'Wicked Dering'? For indeed . . . Aunt Lucinda said but three, sir!"

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### Which Contains Further Mention of a Certain Snuff-Box

"To-day, Bob, is Thursday, I think?"

"It is, sir."

"And your researches teach us that, upon every Thursday, Sturton rides over to Seaford, generally in the evening?"

"Aye, your honour, to a small tavern called The Anchor."

"And there meets a red-headed, seafaring man to whom he pays money."

"Pre-cisely, sir."

"The sailor-man's name being Skag — Jonas Skag."

"The same, your honour."

"Why, then, Bob, see the horses saddled; we will go a-riding."

"To Seaford, sir?"

"To Seaford, Bob."

Thus they were presently ambling down Alfriston's ancient street, between neat and homely cottages from whose doors heads nodded in cheery greeting, past flowery gardens, by fragrant rickyard, where they had brief vision of Mr. Muddle virtuously busied with a pitchfork despite his limp, and so to the winding, tree-shaded road that led uphill and down towards the purple slopes of Windover.

"Sturton hath kept ye fairly busy o' late, Bob."

"His movements, sir, has been constant."

"Indeed, Bob, since we gave up the harassing tactics for a more subtle method, your days ha' been fully occupied. Yet I trust you ha' found time to keep a friendly eye upon our Ancient Dumbrell?"

"I have, sir."

"Good! And how is—"

"She is very well, your honour, and . . . as young as ever!"

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, and they rode awhile in silence. Corporal Robert made to drop behind, but his master stayed him with a gesture.

"Regarding Mrs. Rose, Bob, she often visits the Dumbrells, I think?"

"When not wi' Dame Haryott, sir, or slave-driving Willum Thompson. . . . A on-common dirty soldier he'd ha' made, sir!"

"You see her—Mrs. Rose—frequently, then?"

"I do, sir."

"And do you still think her . . . 'leggy' was the term, I fancy?"

"Aye, sir, but I beg to withdraw 'leggy' as not being in order, Mrs. Rose not being ex-actly what she seems."

"Explain, Bob."

"Well, sir, her speech don't always match her country clothes, and sometimes she's that haughty!"

"Aye, I've noticed the same, myself."

"Yes, your honour."

"What d' ye mean by 'yes,' Bob?"

"I mean, sir, as 'tis nowise sup-rising you should notice, seeing as I've noticed as your honour notices—I mean that she notices—that she an' your honour seem to take a powerful sight o' notice of each other, sir."

"Aye, we do, Bob."

"No offence, your honour?"

"None in the world, Bob."

"But, y' see, sir, there's others has noticed and a-noticing same—daily, your honour."

"Who, Robert?"

"Well, there's Peter Bunkle for one, there's nothing as he don't notice! And old Mr. Dumbrell, he talks o' nothing else, lately."

"Ah, he tells you that I am 'sweet on her,' I suppose?"

"Con-stantly, sir!"

"Well, Bob, the Aged Soul is right — so I am!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ha, you were already aware o' this incredible fact?"

"I sur-mised same, sir."

"You see, Bob, I intend to marry her."

The Corporal was, and actually looked, startled.

"Marry her!" he repeated in a strangled voice. "Your honour! . . . Marry her!"

"Indeed, Bob, I intend to marry and settle down at High Dering at last, unless — aye, unless the Fateful Sisters see fit to cut short the thread o' my existence."

"God forbid, sir!"

"Amen, Bob. And yet the world would wag as merrily without me. . . . Do you believe in presentiments, Bob?"

"No, sir . . . and yet —"

"Neither do I."

"Sir, I 've known men as did."

"Aye, we mortals be queer creatures, Bob! An ill dream, a fit o' the indigestion, a chill on the liver, and we grow full o' forebodings, see dire omens and portents in everything and start at our own shadows. . . . Queer creatures! . . . And here we part awhile. You to keep an eye on the unsuspecting Sturton should he ride hither, and I to The Anchor, where you will meet me at six."

"Very good, sir!"

"'T is like enough our quest may be ended sooner than we hoped, Robert."

So saying, Sir John gave his steed the rein and rode on into Seaford town. Dismounting before the small Anchor Inn, he gave his horse to the ostler and his hand to Mr. Levitt the landlord, who forthwith ushered him into the cosy parlour.

Mr. Levitt was by nature a jovial soul but, just now, his good-natured features were overcast, and he sighed, shaking despondent head over that hard Fate which, as he mournfully declared: "'ad made o' pore Potter an 'omeless wanderer an' drove Cap'n Sharkie Nye into the arms o' them French furrineers and ruinated my

trade, sir. Aye, by the Pize, sir, I moight jest as well close the ol' Anchor for arl the good I do these days — crool 'ard, it calls it!"

"How, is trade so bad, Mr. Levitt?"

"Worser'n bad it be, sir!"

"Is the place quite empty, then?"

"As a blessed drum, sir! Never a soul 'cept a couple o' naum-account chaps. Lord, I dunno wot Sussex be a-comin' tu, that I doan't. Wot I sez is as them theer Preventives will ruin old England, aye by Goles, they will — dannel 'em! Shall us mak' it French wine, sir, or summat a liddle stronger?"

"Nay, let it be October ale, thank ye, Mr. Levitt. And I'll take it in the 'tap.'"

"Why, sir," demurred the landlord, "the 'tap' bean't 'ardly the place for a gen'elman o' your quality, an' Sir 'Ector's friend an' arl."

"But I'm minded for a bench and sanded floor," smiled Sir John, and into the tap he took his way accordingly. It was a smallish chamber, very orderly and clean, but empty except for a carter, in smock and leggings, who snored lustily with his head on the table, and a raw-boned individual with a shock of red hair and a dull, fish-like eye, who sat huddled in a corner and gloomed. To whom Sir John forthwith addressed himself:

"Friend, you drink nothing?"

"Well, an' 'ow can I drink," answered the red-headed man in surly tone; "'ow 's any man to drink out of a empty tankard?"

"That is easily amended."

"Oh, is it, an arl — when a honest man's pockets be as empty as 'is tankard an' nobody to ax 'im to take nothin'?"

"Then I will. Fill for him, Mr. Levitt."

"I would n't, sir!" answered the landlord; "'e 's 'ad enough, I rackon!"

"Oo's 'ad enough?" demanded the red-haired man

truculently. "I ain't never 'ad enough! I never do 'ave enough, no, nor ain't likely to 'ave enough! An' if the loikes o' 'im loikes to treat the loikes o' me, what's to prevent?"

"Well, keep a civil tongue to the gen'elman, an, dannel ye, Jonas Skag!" and Mr. Levitt, setting down the refilled tankard with a bang, stalked away.

"Jonas Skag!" repeated Sir John, eyeing his unlovely companion and shifting nearer to him; "I 've heard that name before."

"No, you ain't!" retorted the other fiercely. "Leastways if y' 'ave you 've never 'eard naun but good of it!"

"True," nodded Sir John; "for you told it me yourself."

"What — I did?" exclaimed the red-headed man, leaning forward to scowl.

"Aye," answered Sir John, leaning forward also until he might look directly into the close-set eyes opposite. "You informed me that a more honest man never trod a plank."

"Well, 't is true! Honest I be, aye, honest as the day — an' I 'd loike t' see the man as says I bean't!" So saying, he lifted the ale to unshaven mouth and drank greedily.

"You don't smoke tobacco!" said Sir John.

"No, I doan't! An' wot be that t' you? Why should I smoke! I doan't loike smoke an' I bean't a-goin' to smoke! Not for the loikes o' you, no — nor no man breathin', I ain't!"

"Perchance you prefer snuff?" Sir John suggested, finger and thumb in waistcoat pocket.

"An' wot if I do? I ain't beggin' an' pleadin' — no, nor yet axin' you for any, be I?"

"No," answered Sir John; "but you may have a pinch for good-fellowship's sake, none the less, if you 're so minded."

"Well, s'posin' I be so minded?"

"Then I make you welcome to my box." And Sir

John took snuff-box from pocket and gave it to the red-haired man's hairy fingers.

The box was shut, and in the act of opening it Jonas Skag grew suddenly still, glaring down at the thing he held, speechless, motionless, scarce breathing, as if indeed it had possessed some deadly power to blast him as he sat; then he seemed to shrink in his clothes, his writhing lips opened, closed again speechlessly, and slipping from his twitching fingers the battered horn snuff-box rolled upon the tiled floor; even then he stared down at it where it lay, until moving slowly like an old man, he leaned down, shaking hand out-stretched. But with an airy motion of his riding-whip, Sir John flicked it from his reach and picking it up slipped it back into his pocket.

With the same unnatural slowness Jonas Skag rose to his feet, and leaning across the table stood glaring at that pocket of Sir John's waistcoat which held that dreadful thing; and after some interval, he spoke in broken whisper:

"Gimme . . . gimme—"

Sir John, leaning back against the wall, stared up into the twitching face, while slowly, slowly, the wide, bloodshot eyes crept up and up until they were glaring into his; thus for a long moment eyes met eyes, and it seemed that Jonas Skag was halting between two courses, groping meanwhile in his darkened soul and questioning passionately with his look. At last, uttering a hoarse, inarticulate sound, he turned, lurched to the door, opened it, leaned there heavily a moment, and was gone.

Then Sir John arose and, leaving his ale untasted, went seeking the landlord.

"Mr. Levitt," said he, "I remember meeting yonder red-haired fellow aboard the *True Believer*. Is he one of Captain Sharkie's regular men?"

"Not by no manner o' means, sir!" answered Mr. Levitt. "A drunken, quarrelsome, naun-account chap

be Jonas. Las' toime Sharkie 'apped along — ah, a-settin' in that very cheer, 'Levitt,' says 'e, 'I 'm done wi' that Jonas for good an' arl!' 'e says."

"And you, like Captain Sharkie, do not trust him?"

"Not so fur as I can see 'im, sir. . . . Why, here be Corporal Doubleday! How goes it, sir, an' what 'll we make it?"

At a nod from Sir John, the Corporal, having "made it" ale, and finished it with commendable speed, Sir John presently arose and, taking hearty leave of Mr. Levitt, stepped into the yard and mounted.

"Well, Bob?" he inquired as they rode. "Our Sturton made hither as usual?"

"He did, sir, but — "

"Was met by the red-headed man, Bob."

"Pre-cisely, sir. Which man seemed in mighty per-tub-ation about somewhat or other, whereupon Sturton takes him into the Bull yonder. And soon arter, sir, out they came from the yard and both of 'em mounted, and away at a gallop. Which seems strange."

"Hum!" exclaimed Sir John. "Did they ride towards Alfriston?"

"Aye, your honour."

"About how long ago?"

"Eggs-ackly eighteen and a half minutes, sir."

"You did not follow 'em?"

"Your honour's orders were to call for you at — "

"Aye, very true, Bob! . . . Eighteen minutes!"

Sir John reined in his horse and sat as if deeply pondering, while the Corporal watched him, serenely patient.

"Is aught wrong, sir?" he inquired at last.

Sir John glanced up and round about upon the peaceful beauty of the countryside.

"'T will be a lovely evening, Robert."

"Quite so, sir."

"We don't believe in presentiments, do we, Bob?"

"No, sir — leastways — "

"Or omens and the like liverish fancies? Now, do we happen to believe in warnings, by any chance?"

"Depends, sir, on who warns and what about."

"And after all, Bob, as Mr. Potter once remarked: 'What is to be, must be!' So let us on and be done with it one way or t'other."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### Which Giveth Some Description of a Murderer's Hat

"Why such speed, sir?" inquired the Corporal as they galloped up the long hill out of Seaford.

"Aye, why indeed!" answered Sir John. "Life is short enough o' conscience! Let us then rather amble the whiles I sum up our case as it standeth to-day. And heed and mark me well, Robert. . . . And we begin with my Lord Sayle, a sordid creature of sordid tastes, of whom 't were better to talk in metaphor. . . . My Lord Sayle, then, is reported to have a keen eye for beauty and a catholic taste; the stately lily, the humble, modest violet each alike find favour in his eyes and he culleth them as he may; he acquireth by money, by guile, by force — aye, frequently by force, for the which he useth divers agents . . . and James Sturton we know for one of these agents.

"Upon a certain evening some two years ago, a young village girl went up Windover, she going thither to carry a cake to her lover, Roger Hobden, who was tending sheep there. So much at least we know for fact; here followeth surmise: James Sturton, in company with another of my lord's agents, by name Jonas Skag, being about their master's evil business, there met with her, and in this desolate place she screamed, and with good reason! Hearing which outcry, Hobden came running. He fought desperately, one against the two, or more for aught we know, and in the struggle received a blow struck, as I believe, by Sturton, though much harder than he meant. . . . And so died poor Roger Hobden."

"But why should you think 't was Sturton struck the fatal blow, sir?"

"Why should Sturton be paying 'hush-money' to Jonas Skag?"

"Aye, true, your honour!"

"And have become my lord's very slave?"

"True again, sir! And he's ever at Oxham's beck and call, moreover."

"One other surmise, Bob. . . . During the struggle Jonas Skag's pocket was torn, and out o' that pocket fell a horn snuff-box —"

"Why, your honour, here's a powerful lot o' surmises! 'T is all mighty reasonable, but ye can't convict a man nor yet hang a man by surmise."

"Very true, Bob. And here is the snuff-box!"

Corporal Robert examined the sorry thing with a degree of interest.

"But how," he inquired, handing it back again, "how can your honour be sure 't was the same box, or that Skag ever saw it, or lost it on the fatal oc-casion?"

"Jonas Skag recognised it, Bob, and in his terror crawled away to Sturton."

"Lord!" exclaimed the Corporal, "so this was why they rid off in such a hurry?"

"Partly, Bob, and partly, I think, to afford us proof that our surmising is very near the truth."

"As how, your honour?"

"Look before us, yonder!" The Corporal stared at the dusty road, at the rolling landscape to right and left, at Sir John, and shook his head.

"Yonder, Bob, the road, you'll notice, winds up in a sharp ascent between steep banks crowned with trees and dense brush. . . . You observe?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, in something less than ten minutes we shall reach the strategic point; then, at word from me, you will spur and take that hill at full gallop —"

"Ah!" quoth the Corporal; "an ambushment, sir?"

"Why, 't is a likely place for such, Bob. Ha' you your pistols?"

"Here, sir!"

"Then have 'em ready! And stoop low in the saddle . . . though you will not be their chief target, I fancy —"

"Your honour . . . sir . . . Sir John, the risk is too great to warrant —"

"Tush, Bob! They have seen us long since and, should we turn tail now, would but choose some other time and place when we were less prepared. Besides, there is about the uncertainty a thrill that stirs me not unpleasingly — and to feel is to be alive!"

"Very good, sir!" answered Robert the Imperturbable, loosing pistols in holsters.

"On the whole, Bob, the country hath an infinity of charms, more especially this fair country o' Sussex. Now! Spur, man, spur!"

A clatter of hoofs spurning the dust, a creaking of saddle-leather, and the two high-spirited animals breasted the steep ascent at a gallop, their riders low-crouched, pistols in hand; they had reached thus the steepest part of the hill when from the bank above rang a shot, followed immediately by a second, and Sir John, rocking in the saddle, dropped his weapon, steadied himself and grasped at right forearm; the Corporal meanwhile, having fired in return, swung to earth and began to scramble up the bank, but, the slope being very precipitous, it was some minutes ere he reached, and vanished among, the dense brush.

"Save thyself further trouble!" cried Sir John. "The rogues will be well away by now, Bob."

"They are, sir!" answered the Corporal ruefully. "But they've left a hat behind 'em!"

"A hat, Bob? Then bring it — bring it hither, man!" Back into the road scrambled Robert forthwith, to behold his master, pale and bloody, whereupon he dropped the hat and came running.

"Are ye hurt bad, sir?"

"Pish — naught to matter! The hat, Bob, the hat!"

The Corporal brought it, turning it this way and that for his master's inspection.

An ordinary, three-cornered hat, devoid of all ornament or garnishings, but of excellent material and workmanship: such a hat as could have covered the head of a prosperous, highly reputable person only.

"By heavens, Bob!" exclaimed Sir John, grim-lipped. "'T is a murderer's hat and might be a magistrate's! Note its sober cock, its generous proportions, its eminent respectability! Have ye ever seen it, ere now, Bob?"

"Aye, I have, sir!" answered the Corporal, scowling.

"'T is a hat in a thousand, Bob, and mayhap shall aid a rogue to the gallows. . . . And now, prithee, look to this arm o' mine."

Deftly the Corporal unbuttoned and rolled back sleeve and ruffled wrist-band, discovering an ugly graze that scored Sir John's arm from elbow to wrist.

"Painful, sir?"

"The smart is tolerable," answered Sir John, wincing a little as the Corporal lapped the wound in the neckerchief he had whipped off for the purpose — "tolerable, Bob, and may be a blessing in disguise."

"How so, your honour?"

"Nay, dispatch, Bob; the sooner we are away from here the better. . . . They may try again, so hurry, man!"

The bandage in place, the Corporal sprang to saddle and, setting spurs to their willing horses, they had soon left that place of danger far behind.

"Now, talking o' pistol-balls and blessings in disguise, your honour?" questioned the Corporal at last.

"With my arm thus, Bob, I am free to meet my Lord Sayle whenever I will."

"But, sir, his wound should be nigh well by now and your arm will be mighty stiff to-morrow."

"But not too stiff to kill him."

"Kill?" repeated the Corporal, and, glancing at his master's pale, set face, said no more.

"When we fought at the White Hart I might ha' reached him time and again, but held my hand because of the oath I swore five years agone."

"Aye, your honour, and to be sure an oath is ever an' always an oath!" nodded the Corporal.

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, eyeing the Corporal a little askance. "But to-day, Bob, I know him for a thing the world were well rid of . . . and yet I will confess to a foolish prejudice, a ridiculous qualm at the idea of having the fellow's death on my hands. And yet this hath nothing whatever to do with my oath."

Here Sir John became thoughtful, whereupon the Corporal reined half a length to the rear, and thus they journeyed in silence, until they were come in sight of the cross-roads.

Now, against the finger-post one of my Lord Sayle's bills had been set up, and before this they espied a stalwart man busily reading by the aid of a short, though formidable bludgeon with which he ticked off each word, letter by letter; this, though a somewhat laborious business, seemed to afford the reader no small pleasure, for more than once he chuckled, and it was with a smile upon his face that he now turned to greet them, touching bludgeon to eyebrow in salute.

"What, Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Sir John. "Where ha' you been these last few days?"

"Here and theer, Mus' Derwent — mostly theer."

"And how are you?"

"Never better, sir."

"Do you chance to have seen a man pass who has lost his hat?"

"Nary a one, sir."

"Why, then, perchance you can recognise the hat — show it him, Bob."

At this, Corporal Robert struck himself a resounding blow upon muscular thigh.

"Damme, sir!" he exclaimed woefully. "Asking your pardon . . . but I left it a-lying on the bank yonder!"

Sir John merely looked, whereupon the Corporal shook his head, wheeled his horse and galloped back along the road.

"'One 'undred pound reward,' sir!" quoth Mr. Potter, with the greatest unction, when the galloping hoof-strokes had died away. "'Dead or Alive,' Mus' Derwent!"

"Aye," nodded Sir John, "surely you run great risk to venture abroad in daylight, and here of all places."

"Why, I dunno as one place be much worse than t' other, sir. . . . But one 'undred pound! Lord, I know it by 'eart. . . . I wish my old feäther might ha' seed it! One 'undred pound for pore Pot's carkiss — dead or alive. A powerful sight o' money it be. I would n't ha' thought they 'd ha' valleyed pore Potter so 'igh-like . . . theer was a 'ighwayman-chap as shot the guard o' the Lewes coach las' year, they only offered twenty-five for 'e! . . . They 've got these 'ere bills posted arl over the plaace 'ereabouts. I know 'em arl an' I reads 'em arl — reg'lar! But theer be a brace o' words as I doan't rightly onderstand, otherwise it arl seems fair enough an' a sight more than Potter expected. First 'ere be this here word 'malefactor.' Well, 't is sartin sure I bean't no female an' no more I bean't no 'factor' . . . then 'ere be t' other 'un, sir . . . 'not-orious.' . . . Well, nobody never says as I was 'orious' as ever I knowed."

His mind at rest upon these two intricate points, Mr. Potter diffidently suggested they should keep company together a "small ways," for:

"Lord, sir," said he, "what wi' barns an' ditches it be few friendly faces pore Potter sees o' late."

Accordingly, Sir John rode on at a hand-pace, Mr. Potter walking beside him.

"Arm 'urted, sir?" he inquired, noting Sir John's bandage.

"Nothing very much, though irksome!"

"Fall, sir?"

"Bullet!"

"Accidental, sir?"

Hereupon Sir John briefly recapitulated the affair, to Mr. Potter's round-eyed surprise.

"Lord, sir," quoth he, "I thought nobody never shot at nothing nor nobody except pore Potter, these days."

"Have you seen anything of your friends Oxham or Sturton lately?"

"Aye sir, seed 'em this very day, I did, over to 'Friston."

"'Friston!" exclaimed Sir John. "Why, that is Lord Sayle's place, surely."

"Aye it be, sir. So there Potter went; ye see, nobody never thought o' lookin' for me in Lord Sayle's barns. Well, sir, theer I did behold Oxham an' Sturton along o' Lord Sayle. Lord Sayle was a-fencing wi' a gentleman in his shirt-sleeves."

"Ah, fencing was he?"

"Aye, sir, in 'is shirt-sleeves, when along comes Oxham and says summat an' p'ints at Sturton, whereupon my lord says summat to Sturton in a mighty passion an' Sturton says summat to Lord Sayle, mighty 'umble, an' Lord Sayle fetches Sturton a clout wi' his fencin'-iron an' sends 'im about 'is business. . . . An' now I'll bid ye good-evenin', sir; yonder lays my road. . . . I've a brace o' birds for ol' Pen. . . . Happen I'll be seeing ye at the Cross purty soon. . . . The *True Believer* 'll be across one o' these nights i' the dark o' the moon, for business be business, sir." So saying, Mr. Potter climbed the adjacent bank, paused to touch bludgeon to eyebrow, and was gone.

Sir John was in sight of Alfriston Church spire when, hearing the approach of galloping hoofs, he turned to behold the Corporal returning.

"Ah!" said he, noting Robert's gloom, "our murderer's hat had vanished, then?"

"Com-pletely, sir!"

"Well, well, never look so glum, man! Our day hath not been wholly vain."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### Of the Terror by Night

June, coming in glory, had flamed out in splendour. August glowed from dewy dawn to dusky eve; upon the warm and slumbrous air was the fragrance of ripening fruit and herb; flowers bloomed sedately in cottage gardens, they rioted in the hedges; fields and uplands were ablaze with them where butterflies wheeled and hovered and bees hummed drowsily about their unceasing labours. The river, winding sleepily between reedy banks, made little slumbrous noises, the very brooks, by reason of the pervading heat and universal somnolence, seemed to hush their chatter; and neighbours in shirt-sleeves, meeting in shady places, yawningly informed each other of the very obvious fact that it was "tur'ble waarmishloike!"

Even Mr. Dumbrell, that "aged soul," perched upon his accustomed stile, admitted that, in his vast experience, he had "knowed a colder August. . . . But, Lord, young man, to 'ear folks talk, you 'd think 't was that 'ot! But look at oi, so grig an' sproy for arl my aage, look at oi, will 'ee!"

"Thou 'rt a truly wonderful man!" answered Sir John.

"Ay, sartin-sure-indeed, oi be!" answered the Aged One. "But oi knawed that afore you was barn!"

"Indeed, Mr. Dumbrell you look heartier than ever——"

"Well, oi bean't! 'Ow can oi be—wi' a musket-ball a-rattlin' my innards an' a granddarter a-rattlin' my out'ards—wi' a bresh? Mak's me wash my face twoice a day, she du—twoice!"

"Consequently you look extreme cool and clean."

"Clean!" snarled the Aged Soul, "doan't 'ee say so, young man, or oi shall 'ate 'ee! No one 'as no call t' be so clean as oi be 'cept p'raps in theer coffins—an' even then I dunno! Theer was Joel Sams, never kemped 'is 'air

in arl 'is days oi du believe, never shaved — not 'im! Only washed of a Sunday 'cos 'is woife made 'im . . . a reg'lar loight-'earted chap were Jo tell 'e took an' doied. Well, when I come to 'elp 'im intu 'is coffin, they 'd washed 'im an' breshed 'im an' shaved 'im till oi did n't roightly know whether 'e were the corp' or no. . . . An' they 'd made 's coffin too small, but in 'e 'ad to go. So oi doubled 'im 'ere, an' oi twisted 'im theer, an' got 'e in some'ow — oi knawed pore Joel would n't moind. . . . An' talkin' o' corpses, wot about your sweet-'eartin', young man?"

"Thank you, it progresses as well as can be expected."

"Ah, but 'ow much do ye expect, young man, that be the p'int. Theer 's folk as generally-arlways expects too much, an' theer 's folks as doan't never expect nothin' no'ow . . . loike Diggory Small's woife as never expected an' would n't expect . . . said 't was nowt but wind 'er did . . . an' so when the child were born everybody called it 'Windy Small,' which were 'ard on the child seein' as Diggory 'ad 'ad it named 'Noble' arter Farmer Axeford's gert cow. . . .

"An' talkin' o' cows, Pen 'Aryott's witched 'er ol' cottage into a noo 'un, she 'ave . . . arl noo painted an' thatched so trig as never was, it be. Which ain't nowise nat'ral — not in Dering it bean't, wheer no cottages bean't never painted nowhen. So 't is witchcraft sure-lye, spells an' black magic, I rackon — unless it be the doing o' liddle Mus' Dobbs."

"And pray, who is he?" inquired Sir John lazily.

"Lord!" exclaimed the Aged Soul in deepest scorn, "Oi would n't ha' beleft as nobody nowheers did n't know 'e. Mus' Dobbs be a liddle ol' chap as bean't a pharysee an' yet moighty loike a pharysee tu, as works an' labours whoiles folks sleep. . . . An' yonder be that 'ere sweet-'eart o' yourn at last akerchally a-kissin' ol' Pen goo'-bye! An' a rare purty lass 'er be tu! Moves so free an' easy as a young blood-mare, doan't 'er? Carries 'er 'ead 'igh an' proud-loike! A foine wench she be sure-lye. . . . Nay, boide wheer ye be, young man, oi 'll go to 'er d'rackly-

minute an' say a word for 'ee, aye I will so. 'T is loike enough oi 'll arg' 'er into weddin' of 'ee afore she knows it, so boide wheer ye be an' leave it arl to oi."

So saying, the Aged One hobbled away, and Sir John, seated beside the stile, watched the little old man salute my lady with hat a-flourish and, bareheaded, offer her his arm.

The sun had set, but earth and heaven were still glorious with his passing; from blooming hedge, fragrant meadow and open down stole a thousand scents that seemed but to strengthen as the shadows fell, a mingled sweetness upon the warm, still air; borne to his ears came the lowing of cows calling to be milked, the plod of horses jingling stablewards, friendly voices murmurous with distance, and an intermittent rustling in the opposite hedge. And Sir John, seated beside the old stile, breathing this warm and fragrant air and hearkening to these peaceful sounds, was none the less suddenly chilled by an intuitive sense of impending evil and turned instinctively to glance towards the opposite hedge where it grew very dense and high, shutting the road from the little spinney beyond. Watching this, it seemed that something crouched there, a something that moved stealthily ever and anon; and there grew within him an uncomfortable feeling that he was watched by unseen eyes, and with this, a consciousness of ever-growing peril. So he sat with head bowed as one in thought, but with eyes keenly watchful and ears heedful of that intermittent rustling so soft and yet so purposeful. For some while he remained thus, his every faculty alert though the leafy stir had ceased and nothing to be heard except the plaintive evensong of the birds. . . . And yet, was there something that moved again beyond the hedge, something that crept nearer and ever nearer with a dreadful patient slowness? A dog? No! A sheep? Perhaps! A man? Well, whatever it was, would soon be directly opposite where he sat; surely it was there already. Once again came a sound of stealthy movement as of something gently forcing itself a passage towards him through the hedge itself. . . .

Sir John cocked the small pistol in his pocket and waited, his eyes grown suddenly fierce. A dog barked in the distance, a sheep-bell tinkled faintly . . . and then was a sound of light footsteps near by and Ann Dumbrell came slowly along the lane and paused near by, her gaze intent upon some distant point, as one who awaited an expected presence; then Sir John, himself unseen where he crouched, beheld her start, saw her hands clasp each other, heard the fall of quick-striding feet that paused suddenly and then came on again, but more slowly.

"Why, 't is never you, Mus' Doubleday?" she exclaimed.

"None other, Mrs. Ann," answered the Corporal, halting and surveying her shy loveliness with gloomy eyes.

"You see," he explained, "it so happens as I . . . chanced to be . . . coming this way and . . . well, here I am, mam!"

"Yes, Mus' Doubleday. An' us be arlways pleased to see 'ee whenever it be . . . though granfer bean't in yet. . . . I — I were just agoing tu look for 'e. An' 'ow be you, sir?"

"As well as can be expected!" he sighed dismally. "Lord love me, Mrs. Ann, but ye look younger than ever this evening!"

"But I be older than I were this marnin', sir."

"Why, so you told me yesterday," answered the Corporal reproachfully, his gloom deepening, "an' yet here y' are this evening lookin' younger than ever!"

"O Mus' Doubleday," she laughed, "'ow may that be? I were a liddle baby once, an' looked younger then, I rackon."

"I wish," said the Corporal bitterly — "I wish that you — no, I wish that I had been — but what 's the use o' wishing? Only . . . if you had only been a . . . bit older . . . if only you had — "

"Aye, an' what then, sir?" she questioned eagerly.

"No matter, mam."

"But, Mus' Doubleday, I du be a-growin' older an' older every day!"

"Aye," groaned the Corporal, "so am I!"

"An' yonder comes grandfer along o' Mrs. Rose! She be rarely 'andsome, don't 'ee think?"

"So, so!" sighed the Corporal.

"O Mus' Doubleday! I'm sure she's the rarest beauty!"

"Maybe," admitted the Corporal, "only I don't 'appen to ha' noticed."

"But you got eyes, sure?"

"Aye, I have," nodded the Corporal, looking at pretty Ann until she blushed again, "an' I think I know a fair lass when I happen to see one, but . . . being a man o' forty-five winters, mam, an' no young galli-vantin' lad, I looks, and thinks, and says nothing."

"Why, then, Mus' Doubleday," sighed she, "won't 'ee come an' say it indoors — afore grandfer sees us?"

And so they passed on, walking very close together, though the Corporal resolutely kept his hands buried in the deep side-pockets of his coat.

Then Sir John arose lazily and made a great business of yawning and stretching, though keeping well in the shadow of the tree behind him, and presently sauntered along the lane to where the thick hedge opposite was pierced by a gate. Here his manner underwent a sudden change; in a flash he had vaulted the gate, and, pistol ready, crouched where he might behold the other side of this rustling hedge. . . . No one! And yet how should a hedge rustle so very persistently and no wind stirring? And now his quick glance saw that which answered the question beyond all doubt: the place was a tangle of lusty weeds and wild-flowers that stood very dense and lush save immediately behind the hedge, for here they showed bent and broken as by the recent passage of a heavy body, a narrow trail, following the line of hedge, a betraying track that swung off at a right angle towards the leafy solitude of the little spinney. Had baffled Murder crept that way? Did it skulk there still?

Staying not to debate the point, Sir John set hand to

gate and vaulted back into the lane — to the vociferous indignation of Mr. Dumbrell, for being startled by this so sudden appearance, the Aged Soul stamped and swore and shook his stick at Sir John in highly ferocious manner.

"Dannel ye!" he snarled. "Will 'ee goo for tu frouden a old, aged, ancient soul as would be j'yful tu be a-diggin' your grave for 'ee d'rackly-minute? 'Tidn't respectful, no! Dannel 'ee twoice!"

"I beg your pardon."

"Well, 'ee can go on a-beggin'; 'ee wun't get no pardon from oi. A-jumpin' out 'pon a aged man as 'ave been a-makin' love fur 'ee till oi du be nigh black i' the faace!"

"Then I am deeply grateful, and — "

"Aye, an' oi told a mort o' loies fur 'ee, oi did!"

"Lies?"

"Aye, did n't oi tell 'er you was a-poinin' fur 'er — an' you ain't! Did n't oi tell 'er as the best o' food sech as beef an' pork would n't nowise lay easy on your stummick arl along o' her? Did n't oi tell 'er as you was a foine, up-standin', 'andsome young felley — which you ain't — not by no manner o' means, an' that if she did n't mak' sure of 'ee, there was a mort o' purty lasses arl ready for to snap 'ee up? Which they ain't. An' now 'ere be you a-doin' your best to frouden a pore, ancient creeter into 'is grave afore 'is toime! . . . D' ye call that gratitood?"

"Forgive me!"

The Aged Soul snorted.

"Arl of a trimble oi be. The next lass as you think o' marryin', you can woo 'er yourself — doan't ax oi! Ah, an' oi be glad now as she said what she did say!"

"And what was that, Ancient One?"

"Says as she 'd wait and see which o' they purty lasses would snap at 'ee first, she did. . . . An' I rackon she 'll 'ave to wait a tur'ble long time."

"And pray where is she now?"

"A-settin' 'long o' my granddarter an' Mus' Doubleday, fur sure."

But my lady was leaning upon the old stile, and fresh from the sighful confidences of shy Ann in the little kitchen and the Corporal's halting disparagement of the age forty-five in the little garden, was thinking only of him for whom she waited, of herself and the future; thus when hearing his step she glanced up, Sir John saw that in her look which stirred him to such joyous wonder that he yearned to clasp and kiss her then and there; but she, aware of this, drew back, so truly shy and off her guard for once that she quite forgot to act. So he turned and took the little, old man by the shoulders instead.

"O Mr. Dumbrell!" quoth he rapturously. The old man snorted. "Aged Soul!" Mr. Dumbrell scowled. "Friend Hosea!" The old man stared. "To-day my respect of thee mounteth high as heaven . . . thou 'rt a far better wooer than I dreamed! So shall sit in comfort all thy days henceforth. And so good-night, my ancient Hosea, thou honoured, Aged Soul — good-night!"

Then Sir John vaulted the stile, aided my lady over, and side by side they set out for Alfriston through a peaceful countryside glorious with sunset. Forgotten now the sinister rustling of hedges and all else under heaven save the sweet, shy droop of her lashes so new in his experience of her, for here no longer was prideful coquetry full of modish affectations, but rather the Rose-child of his dreams, and what else could matter so long as her hand lay thus within his arm and her foot trod with his the velvet ling.

"Rose," said he, halting suddenly, "a while ago love looked at me from thine eyes. . . . O child, come, kiss me!" And then his arm was about her; but, though very conscious of the tender yearning of his voice, and even while yielding to the mastery of his arm, she laughed a little unsteadily:

"Indeed, John, the Aged Soul did plead thy cause so irresistibly . . . it seems thou canst neither eat nor sleep . . . he told me thy — thy 'innards be arl shook to pieces with love' . . . he urged the woes o' thy poor

stomach so passionately that I looked to see him weep . . ."

"Hum!" quoth Sir John; and then: "Rose, when will you marry me?"

"This depends on how long you intend playing the part of John Derwent, sir."

"And this again, Rose, depends on how soon my Lady Herminia will marry Sir John Dering."

"Nay, first, John, she is determined on wedding my Aunt Lucinda to your friend, Sir Hector."

"'S life, and is she so, child?" he exclaimed a little ruefully. "'Faith, 't is like the contrary Herminia, for here is plaguy difficult problem."

"And yet should be easily resolved betwixt us, John."

"Nay, but the Duchess called Sir Hector an ogre, and he blenches at mere mention of her name. . . ."

"To be sure, John, the situation is very promising and needeth but a little dexterous management. You will prompt Sir Hector, I 'll plague my aunt . . . is 't agreed, John?"

"It is!" he laughed. "And now — come, kiss me?" But she held him off, viewing him grave-eyed.

"John," said she solemnly, "to-day old Penelope was monstrous strange and full of foreboding on your account . . . 'twas as she knew some danger threatened. But it is all so sweetly peaceful, what should harm you here?"

"What indeed?" he answered, glancing furtively towards the lengthening shadows behind them.

"And yet old Penelope was so awesome o' speech and look. . . . I can mind her every word: 'He hath raised what only blood can lay!' said she. Sounds not this dreadful, John? And then: 'Bid him beware the peril o' solitary places!' quo' she, 'of things that creep i' the dark! Day and night bid him look behind him wherever — '"

My lady paused suddenly, for Sir John was indeed glancing back over his shoulder.

They had crossed the stile beyond the little foot-bridge and were following a path bordered by dense underbrush

and shaded by tall trees. Sir John's quick ear had caught a faint creak such as a stealthy foot might make on the rickety planking of the bridge; moreover, his eyes had glimpsed a vague shape that flitted unheard among the brush.

"John," said my lady breathlessly, "why d' ye look so? . . . Ah, what is it?" And he winced beneath the pressure of her fingers upon his wounded arm.

"Pray loose me!" he whispered, and slipped hand into pocket.

"John," she breathed, "tell me what cometh yonder?"

"Nay, this I must discover," he answered, and loosed her hands, for now, plain to hear, was a faint rustling amid the brush. . . . And then she had leapt between Sir John and this scarce-heard, unseen thing, had twined strong arms about him, holding him so close that he might sense all the fragrant warmth of the soft and pliant body that shielded his; thus stood they awhile, her soft cheek against his, and now he could feel the heavy beating of her heart against his own. The stealthy rustling came again, crept nearer, paused, crept past them, died away, and nothing to be heard except the melodious murmur of the brook hard by. And then my lady spoke, her voice low but undismayed:

"'T is gone, I think, and . . . O John!"

His arms were about her, straining her closer yet, and when he spoke his voice was strangely hoarse and shaken:

"O thou dear, brave soul! Thou very woman! . . . Yon creeping terror hath shown thee greater, nobler than I dared dream thee! . . . When, when wilt marry me?"

"Nay, John," she answered gently, "how may I tell thee this till thou ask Herminia. . . . Go to her, John, seek and woo the poor, despised, solitary soul."

"Aye, I will — but when? Where?"

"To-morrow afternoon, John, at the cottage . . . and come as Sir John Dering."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### How They Warned Captain Sharkie Nye

Dusk was falling as Sir John paused beside the old cross whose worn base chanced to be propping divers and sundry brawny backs: Mr. Muddle leaned there side by side with Mr. Pursglove; there also were Messrs. Godby, Unstead and Comfort, each and all of whom seemed extremely wide-awake and more than usually talkative notwithstanding the pervading drowsiness of the warm, stilly air.

"G'd evenin', Mus' Derwent; tur'ble waarm it do ha' been to-day sure-lye," quoth Mr. Muddle.

"Though theer was a bit o' wind stirrin' 'bout 'leven o'clock 's marnin'," added Mr. Pursglove.

"Aye, but it doied awaay it did, afore twalve," said Mr. Godby.

"Rackon my peas 'll do naun good 'appen it doan't rain," opined Mr. Comfort.

And yet Sir John knew instinctively that it was neither to discuss the unusual heat of the weather nor Mr. Comfort's languishing peas that had brought them hither in murmurous conclave.

And surely it was no very extraordinary sight to behold Parson Hartop ambling up the street on his plump steed, even though Mr. Pym strode at his stirrup, and yet the four worthies seemed vaguely uneasy none the less.

Reaching the cross, Mr. Hartop drew rein and Mr. Pym, grounding the long musket he carried, wiped perspiring brow.

"Is George Potter hereabouts?" he inquired in accents discreetly modulated.

"No, Mus' Pym."

"Then you must find him — at once!"

"Aye, Mus' Pym . . . but whoy, sir, an' wherefore?"

"Tell 'em, Hartop!" said the Painter.

"Friends," said the Parson, leaning down from his saddle and addressing them much as if it had been a pulpit; "ye refractory souls, we be all of us human and therefore prone to err. But for myself, having the cure of souls among ye, I regard ye all as my wayward children, and, when I see ye rushing blindly on destruction, hold it my bounden duty to warn ye thereof. . . . Hark ye, then! Cuckmere Haven is watched to-night! There be many soldiers hidden there and upon the cliff. I have seen them with my own eyes; heed therefore my word! Pass the warning to your fellows, and thereafter let each o' ye seek your beds with due gratitude to that ever beneficent Providence that by my humble means hath, yet again, saved ye from dire peril o' your bodies."

"In a word," added Mr. Pym, "the Preventives ha' been warned somehow and are out in force, and but for our parson would ha' shot or taken every man o' ye!"

"One other matter," sighed Mr. Hartop; "you will tell George Potter, most wayward of all my children, that next time he is necessitated to use the church tower he will leave space for the bell-ropes to play freely: on the last occasion, as you will doubtless remember, the tenor bell could not be rung up."

"Arl roight, Mus' Hartop, sir, an' thank 'ee koindly! Ye see, 't were one o' they liddle tubs, sir, as went an' jammed hisself, Mus' 'Artop, sir. An' a praper parson ye be, sure-lye."

"Aye, a moighty good passon to we, sir. A true gen'leman as do ever tak' our part, you be, sir."

"Alas!" sighed Mr. Hartop. "Alas, that ye should need me so to do! . . . Pray show more care hereafter as regards my bells . . . and mind, home all o' ye, and forget not your prayers. . . . Good night."

So saying, Parson Hartop saluted them all with lifted hat and ambled away, whereupon the four worthies, big with the news, hasted forthwith to the Market Cross Inn.

"Ha!" quoth Mr. Pym, leaning upon his musket and looking after the Parson's retiring figure. "Said I not

we were all smugglers hereabouts, Mr. Derwent? And yonder goeth the best of us all, a truly saintly man, sir. And now for Potter."

They found the inn agog with the tidings.

"Guid save's a'!" exclaimed Sir Hector, "what o' poor Sharkie Nye?"

"Why, sir," answered Mr. Bunkle, the philosopher, "never worrit! Life hath its downs as well as its ups, an' Sharkie 'll never put in shore wi'out the signal."

"But this looks like treachery, Peter!" fumed Sir Hector. "And syne they ken sae muckle 't is vera like they 'll ken the signal likewise. Whaur 's Geordie, I maun hae a worrd wi' Geordie Potter. Whaur bides he, Peter man?"

"A sight nigher than 'e seems, sir!" answered Mr. Bunkle and, winking, led them into his inner, much-doored holy of holies. Here he rapped certain times upon the panelling, and rap answered him; thereafter one of the five doors opened and Mr. Potter appeared, placid as ever and surprisingly neat, except for a cobweb adhering to one newly trimmed whisker.

Upon hearing Mr. Pym's news, he grew profoundly thoughtful and stood awhile staring into the fire.

"Sir Hector be right, I rackon!" said he at last. "'T is a spy's work, sure-lye . . . an' there be only one way to mak' sarten an' that be to go theer — "

"Do 'ee mean Cuckmere 'Aven, Jarge?"

"Aye, Peter, I do. I be a-goin' d'rackly-minute to watch. If they shows the signal light a-swing from cliff, I 'll know 't is a spy . . . an' must warn Sharkie off — "

"Aye, but how, Jarge?"

"Wi' this, Peter." And from a pocket of the frieze coat Mr. Potter drew a short-barrelled, heavy pistol. "I wait till Sharkie be within 'ail and let fly . . . flash 'll warn 'im. . . . An' noo I 'll be a-goin' — "

"An' I 'm wi' ye, Geordie man!" quoth Sir Hector, reaching for his hat.

"And I," said Sir John, clapping on his own.

"Why, Lord love 'ee, gen'lemen!" exclaimed Mr. Potter, "'t won't be nowise easy-goin'. I be for short cuts 'cross Down, ship-tracks an' hidden ways."

"No matter," answered Sir John.

"An' what 's more, sirs, happen us reaches Cuckmere in time, when I fires to warn Sharkie 't is but to be expected as they Preventive lads 'll fire back at me . . . so 't is best I go alone, I rackon —"

"Hoot-toot, Geordie, ye 're wastin' an awfu' lot o' wind; save it tae better purpose, man, for we 're gangin' wi' ye."

"And I also," said Mr. Pym, examining the flint of his musket.

"Why, then, come your ways, sirs," said Mr. Potter; "but if we be took, 't is as smugglers you 'll be served —"

"And why not?" retorted Mr. Pym argumentatively. "Are not all Sussex folk smugglers at heart; aye, and mankind in general, for matter o' that?"

"Well, good fortun' go wi' ye, sirs," said Mr. Bunkle. "'T will be middlin' dark; moon doan't rise till three o'clock. . . . An' there 'll be a bowl o' summat 'ot waitin' agin your return. You ought to be back inside two hours, eh, Jarge?"

"Why, as to that, Peter," answered Mr. Potter in his placid manner, "what is to be, will be, I rackon!" And opening a door he led them forth by a discreetly unobtrusive passage that brought them to a back lane, to a footpath skirting the rope walk, and so to a steep upland, rising against the stars.

Once clear of the village, Mr. Potter went at a pace that Sir John found somewhat trying by reason of the difficult country. Moreover, his hurt arm irked him; but Mr. Pym strode unfaltering, up hill and down, despite the heavy musket he bore, and Sir Hector's long legs seemed tireless.

Though there was no moon as yet, the stars made a palpitant glow, a glimmering dusk wherein all objects loomed up vague and unfamiliar. To Sir John the dim

forms of his silent companions seemed like phantoms in a phantom world; stumbling and breathless he struggled on, feeling as one in a nightmare, conscious of spectral shapes that reached out ghostly arms, or touched him with clammy fingers — things that by day were trees and bushes, but now were things very evil and sinister.

On he stumbled, sometimes treading the dust of a road, but mostly they seemed to be climbing or descending some grassy slope.

Mr. Potter went by ways known only to himself; he led them through narrow lanes deep-sunk in the chalk, through black alleys roofed by tangled thickets and dense-growing bushes, leafy tunnels sweet with honeysuckle; up and up and down steep, thymey slopes, across lush meadows where the feet sank deep, past brooks that gurgled sleepily in the dark; on and ever on, reeling and sweating through a windless darkness, until, breasting a slope, there met them a sweet, cool breath and to their ears came the hoarse murmur of the sea. Then Mr. Potter halted, and when he spoke it was in a whisper:

"Yonder lays Cuckmere, sirs . . . tide 'll be at flood in 'arf an hour, I rackon, an' the *True Believer* should be a-layin' hove to out yonder. Afore Sharkie stands in he 'll show two lights — white above red, which means 'Is arl clear?' Then, if there be spies yonder, they 'll swing a lanthorn from the cliff, which means 'Arl clear.' So bide ye here, sirs, an' watch fur Sharkie's signal whiles I tak' a look round. But happen ye see Potter's wepping flash, why, then — run for your lives . . . an' softly it be!" So saying, Mr. Potter dropped upon hands and knees, crawled away and vanished.

Sir John, panting upon the grass, could make out the loom of precipitous cliff, the vague line of shore, the white foam of incoming tide; upon his right hand crouched Mr. Pym, the barrel of his musket cutting across the stars, upon his left knelt Sir Hector, bulking more gigantic than nature in the dimness; and then he was startled by Mr. Potter's voice immediately behind him:

"Back, sirs, back an' easy it is, for y'r lives! . . . They sojers be right afore us — thick as mushrooms . . . aye, thick as 'rooms they be, so easy it is, sirs . . . we must to the beach . . . foller Potter, sirs . . . an' tread cautious!"

Gliding like phantoms, they followed whither Mr. Potter led, while ever the beat of the incoming waves grew louder. Suddenly beneath Sir John's foot a piece of rotten driftwood snapped, seeming to him loud as a pistol-shot, and he stood, breath in check, half expecting a hoarse challenge and the roaring flash of musketry; instead, he heard Mr. Potter's whisper:

"Lay down, sirs . . . easy! Now watch the sea yonder!"

To Sir John, thus outstretched, hearing only the throb of his own heart and remembering all those men who lay so murderously silent, so patiently watchful and expectant, it seemed that looming cliff and vague foreshore were places of supreme horror, since death lurked there; the very night seemed foul of it.

And then came Mr. Potter's soft, untroubled whisper:

"Yonder, sirs! . . . Yonder cometh Sharkie Nye! . . . D' ye see yon twinkle? . . . Up she swings — the white! . . . Now the red! Aye, yonder lays the *True Believer* hove to an' waitin' the answerin' signal. . . . Watch the cliff, sirs — "

Almost as he spoke, was an answering beam of light upon the grim headland, a light that winked once or twice and then was swiftly lowered until it hung suspended halfway down the cliff.

"O Geordie-man — O Geordie!" whispered Sir Hector. "'T is betrayed ye are, lad — yon proves it beyond a' doot!"

"Aye, by the Pize," whispered Mr. Potter, "yonder's black treachery! A light a-top o' cliff any fule might show . . . but a light a-dangle 'arf-way down! . . . Look, sir — God love us . . . Sharkie be a-standin' in — "

"To his death, Geordie — himsel' and a' his lads!"

"Not whiles Potter can waarn 'em, sirs!" And, speaking, Mr. Potter got to his knees, but there Mr. Pym's grip on his leg arrested him.

"What 's to do, George?" he inquired.

"Liddle enough, sir, but arl I can. . . . Potter be a-goin' down yonder to th' edge o' the tide, an' soon as they be nigh enough I lets fly with both my pistols —"

"And commit suicide, George Potter!"

"Why, they sojers may miss me, sir . . . an' I shall run amazin' quick and — hark, sir . . . Sharkie be a-towin' in wi' his boats!" Sure enough, faint though distinct was the sound of oars.

"Lord love me!" exclaimed Mr. Potter, his placidity quite gone. "They be closer ashore than I thought . . . loose my leg, sir!"

"Not so, George!" answered the Painter. "Your plan is extreme clumsy and offers but problematical chance o' success whiles you run great risk o' wounds or death, and Captain Nye may be nothing advantaged. Now, upon the other hand —"

"Mus' Pym, Mus' Pym, it be no time to arg' — lemme go, sir!"

"Heark 'ee now, George Potter, 'twill take Sharkie Nye some half-hour to tow into musket-shot in this dark whiles yon lanthorn, though a fairish distance, is yet well within range . . . nay, patience, George, lie still and listen to me! The trouble seems to be yonder lanthorn — very well, let us incontinent extinguish yon lanthorn. . . ."

"Aye, but how, sir — how?"

"Hold thy tongue, George, and give me elbow-room."

"Why — why, Mus' Pym," gasped Potter, "you never think as you can manage . . . so fur . . . sich a liddle bit of a thing as yon lanthorn?"

"With a bow and arrow, George, which was a weapon of less precision than such musket as mine, the worthy Tell split an apple imposed upon his small son's head . . . and to-night . . . hum! Give me room, George!"

Mr. Pym extended himself comfortably at full length;

they heard the sharp click as he cocked his long piece, watched him level it across convenient rock, held their breaths while he dwelt upon his aim; a spurt of fire, a roar that reverberated far and wide, a puff of smoke . . . and the swinging light was not. Ensued a moment of utter stillness, then from seaward came an answering flash, hoarse commands, the red and white lights vanished, and thereafter a riot of sound as the gloom of cliff and foreshore was stabbed by musketry fire; and, lying face down upon the grass, Sir John heard the whistle and hum of bullets in the air above him.

"Quick!" cried Potter. "Run fur it, sirs, whiles they reload. . . . They marked Mus' Pym's flash an' some on 'em 's arter us — so quick it be!"

A panting minute or so across smooth turf, a stumbling descent, a desperate scrambling over loose pebbles, a breathless race across wet sand, a groping among boulders . . . and Sir John found himself alone; he was standing thus, staring dazedly about him, in his ears the shouting of his nearer pursuers, when from the dimness above a long arm reached forth, a mighty hand grasped coat collar, and he was swung from his feet, dragged through a rocky fissure, and found himself crouched beside Sir Hector.

"Aha, Johnnie," whispered the giant, hugging him until he blenched with the pain of his arm, "is this no' a bonny place? They ca' it Pook's Kitchen — forbye, there 's few as kens it . . . the De'il himsel' could na' find us here, y' ken. . . . Whisht, lie ye still, Johnnie; yon be only Pym a-cursing, an' sma' wonder; the puir gentleman was forced tae leave his gun behind. . . . O Pymmie-man," quoth Sir Hector, wedging his vast bulk deeper into the narrow cave, "'t is a sinfu', waefu', shamefu' thing ye should hae wasted y'r gifts on paint when ye wad hae made sic a bonny musketeer!"

"So far as my memory serves," sighed Mr. Pym the Painter, "I dropped it just after we crossed the pebble-ridge."

## CHAPTER XL

### Describes, Among Other Things, How My Lady Trampled Triumphantly at Last

### I

"Beef, sir," said Mr. Bunkle, laying a slice caressingly upon Sir John's plate, "cold roast beef, sir, can be ate any'ow an' anywhen, but sech beef as this 'ere is best took plain and ungarnished . . . though I wun't deny as a slice or so o' b'iled 'am took therewith doan't go oncommon well, t' other actin' upon which an' bringing out the flavour o' both, sir, d' ye see! So shall us mak' it beef-an'-'am, sir?"

"Assuredly!" answered Sir John, seating himself at the table.

"Sir 'Ector used t' swear by my beef-an'-'am, 'e did, but 'e doan't tak' 'is breakfast 'ere no more . . . a changed man 'e be, sir."

"How so, Mr. Bunkle?"

"Well, ain't you noticed 'is wig, sir?"

"Not particularly."

"'As it combed an' curled reg'lar nowadays, 'e do . . . sich a 'appy, careless gen'leman 'e used to be, but lately . . . well, 'e was a-wearin' 'is second-best coat yesterday! Ah, a changed man be Sir 'Ector." And Mr. Bunkle nodded, winked and departed about his business.

His breakfast done, Sir John arose and, mindful of his promise to Herminia, took his hat and sallied forth for the matrimonial "prompting" of the devoted Sir Hector MacLean.

His reception was not propitious, for scarcely had he stepped across Sir Hector's threshold than that gentleman's voice hailed him reproachfully:

"Whisht, man — y'r boots!"

"What of 'em, Hector?"

"Ye've never s' muckle as wiped 'em, John! D' ye no' ken wha' yon mat's for? Here's Rose, sweet lass, slavin' for an auld sojer-body's comfort; here's Wully Tamson workin' himsel' tae skin an' bane — when her eye is upon him — an' here's ye'sel', Johnnie, treading dust a' aboot the floor! O man, hae a leetle conseederation!"

Sir John, having carefully wiped his boots under Sir Hector's strict supervision, took occasion to glance round and behold the wonders achieved, for indeed chaos had given place to comfort and a dainty orderliness; it beamed and shone, it winked and twinkled in polished brass and silver, it stirred gently in the curtains at open lattice, it lay in the rugs upon raddled floor, it gleamed in the polished andirons on the spotless hearth, and breathed in fragrance from the bowl of flowers upon the mantel.

"'T is marvellous what a woman can achieve, Hector!"

"Some women, John!"

"We be miserable creatures without 'em, Hector."

"Aye, John, but woefu' wretches wi' 'em — generally."

"Now, talking of Rose — "

"Man, she's the exception! She's like a beam o' sunshine aboot the place . . . sae neat, sae sweet . . . an' cook? Losh, Johnnie, she can roast or boil sae savoury 't would mak' a man wish he were a camel wi' twa stomachs! An' there's Wully Tamson! Wully's a changed man . . . when fou, whilk is no' vera often, he gangs aroond wi'oot his boots an' sleeps i' the woodshed. I' fegs, Wully Tamson is — "

"But we are talking of Rose."

"Aye, John, an' 't is a gey lucky man ye'll be tae win sic a wife! She's a walkin' wonder!"

"Very true, Hector. And talking of wives, what of her aunt, the . . . Mrs. Saunders?"

"Aye, an' what o' her, Johnnie?"

"Well, is it not reasonable to suppose that the so great virtues of the niece will be found intensified in the aunt?"

"An' what then, John?"

"Why, then, seeing I woo the wondrous niece, why should not you woo the more wonderful aunt?"

Sir Hector very nearly dropped his cherished pipe.

"Me, is it?" he exclaimed — "me woo a wumman? Me — wi' ane leg i' the . . . Losh, Johnnie man, are ye rin clean daft, whateffer?"

"She is a woman of refinement, Hector, and altogether charming, and as a wife — "

"Whisht, man, ye fair mak' me blush!"

"And you, Hector, are none so ill-looking — 'when fresh shaved,' and your wig combed and ironed. Thou 'rt vigorous and strong as a bull — "

"Will ye no' hae done, John!"

"And she a delightful creature with the very charmingest natural complexion and adorable eyes. You must ha' noticed 'em when peeping at her."

"Peeping!" gasped Sir Hector.

"Aye, over the wall."

"John," exclaimed Sir Hector, rising and drawing himself to his gigantic height, "I may, peradventure, have . . . chanced to cast a — a neighbourly glance over the party-wall occasionally, but — peep, sir? I scorn the imputation!"

"But i' faith, Hector, I vow she is well worth peeping at."

"Sir," quoth Sir Hector, reaching hat and cane — "sir, a MacLean never peeps!" Having said which, he clapped on his hat and stalked majestically away.

## II

"Heavens, Herminia, how can you?"

"What, aunt dear?"

"Sprawl there like any naughty nymph . . . and your petticoats . . . so careless and bold . . . showing the prideful perfection o' your proportions, the fullness o' your forms . . . like a graceless Greek goddess on a vase . . . so free! Get up, child, do!"

Herminia laughed and, pillowing head on clasped hands,

stretched shapely limbs voluptuously upon her grassy couch and stared up dreamily through the leaves of the apple tree to the cloudless blue.

"Concern me, child!" exclaimed the Duchess, glancing apprehensively towards the party-wall. "Suppose he should be prying as usual?"

"He would never see me, dear aunt! He hath eyes for no one and nothing but you. And small wonder, for you are looking extreme well o' late. You grow younger every day, I swear y' do . . . that gown, now, becometh you vastly!"

"Mm!" quoth the Duchess, eyeing her niece warily. "Why this fulsome flattery, pray?"

"'T is merest truth, aunt! And thou 'rt looking thy best to-day, which is well, for in half an hour I take thee to meet him."

"Him, Herminia? Can you possibly mean — him?"

"Him, aunt."

"That odious ogre — "

"That gentle giant, aunt."

"I 'll not go, Herminia."

"I suggest thy little laced cap with the blue ribbands, aunt."

"I detest your hateful giant, minx!"

"Blue ribbands set off thy beauteous eyes to admiration, dear aunt!"

"I say I 'll not go."

"And thy morocco shoes, aunt dear . . . indeed, thou hast the littlest, prettiest foot i' the world!"

"I vow I 'll not stir one step to see your odious giant."

"Then shall I carry thee, thou sweet atomy."

The Duchess stamped, sat down and frowned, but when she spoke her voice was surprisingly complaisant:

"My cap with the blue ribbands and my morocco shoes? So be it, thou wilful wretch — go you and fetch 'em!"

Herminia yawned, stretched languorously and rose.

"Dearest my aunt," quoth she, "when thou 'rt happily espoused, forget not 't was thy loving niece — "

"Tush, minx — begone!"

Herminia went; but scarcely had her stately form vanished within the narrow doorway than the Duchess stealthily arose, caught up her sunbonnet and, opening the wicket gate in the garden wall, hasted away down the leafy back-lane.

III

Sir John was observing his resplendent image in the mirror; full-skirted, embroidered coat moulded his graceful slenderness to perfection; his gold-buttoned, flowered waistcoat was a work of art, white satin small-clothes and gold-clocked silk stockings offset a pair of shapely legs; diamonds sparkled in shoe buckles and cravat; the long, glossy curls of his peruke fell in that precise abandon which was strictly *à la mode;* and yet his delicate brows were wrinkled in disapprobation.

"They feel distinctly tightish, Bob!" he mourned. "I've grown damnably robust and positively bucolic — horrific thought! Gad's my life, I'm as swarthy as a gipsy! Alack, Bob, where is now my romantic pallor? How the devil may a man languish soulfully with a colour like a yokelly ploughman? Vastly distressing, on my soul it is!"

"A patch, sir?" suggested the imperturbable one.

"Two, Bob, one at my mouth — exactly here! Now t'other below my eye — so! Now a dash o' the gilly-flower essence . . . and now my lightest cloak to veil me from the curious."

IV

It was Mr. Unstead's dun cow that did it, on this wise: chancing to meet the small Duchess in the lane, this gentle ruminant had thrust forth moist, inquiring muzzle and puffed in gusty fragrance, whereupon the Duchess uttered a scream, a ladylike outcry small in volume as herself, but a cry that was answered none the less very suddenly and to her own gasping astonishment, for as she stood,

crouched against the mossy wall, staring fearfully at the dun cow's perilous horns, she felt herself caught up, lifted gently and set upon the broad coping of the wall, whence she looked down to see the Ogre (in his second-best coat) gently urge the inquisitive quadruped through an adjacent gate; which done, and the gate secured, he returned and, uncovering bewigged head, favoured the Duchess with a profound obeisance.

"Madam," he began in his very choicest English, "I sincerely trust that"—here, suddenly espying her Grace's small and very pretty feet, Sir Hector blinked and resolutely averted his eyes—"that ye're no' fashed or by-ordinar' afeart by reason o' yon coo, mam. She's an unco' gentle creature an' wadna' harm a babe, mam—"

"But I'm not a babe, sir!" she retorted, crossing her little feet demurely and making the most of the pretty things—"far from it, sir! And I detest cows . . . especially in lanes! . . . cows are so horribly horny!"

"Why, as to that, mam," answered Sir Hector a little vaguely, his glance upon her feet again, "cows' horns are a dispensation o' Providence. . . . Nature gave a cow horns—"

"To fright fearsome females, sir! And here sitteth one perilously perched and full o' fears lest she fall! Take her down, sir—instantly," said the Duchess.

Sir Hector glanced up and down the lane, looked at the little Duchess and blenched.

"D' ye hear me, sir?" she demanded.

"Ou aye, Mrs. Saunders!" he answered. "Hae patience, mam. . . . Bide a wee . . . !" And he turned away; but scarce had he achieved two paces than she summoned him back imperiously.

"How, sir," cried she, "will ye leave me—desert me in this dreadful situation? Heaven help me, 't would seem I am fated to sit helplessly aloft—"

"A ladder, mem. . . . I've a ladder in my garden."

"Tush for your ladder, sir! To leave me here—so heartless and hateful!"

"Heartless, mam! No, no! By means o' my ladder y' ken—"

"Ha' done wi' your ladder, sir!"

"But, losh, mam, hoo wull ye come doon wi'oot my ladder?"

"How did I get here, pray?"

"Leddy, 't was a' by the inspiration o' the moment."

"Then pray be 'inspired' again, sir."

Sir Hector flushed, glanced at her little, helpless feet, her roguish eyes, fumbled with his hat and dropped it; the little Duchess giggled. Then Sir Hector took a deep breath and reached out his arms.

## V

Sir John, giving hat and cloak to the placid Betty, glanced round the small room.

"Pray tell your lady that Sir John Dering awaits her pleasure," said he, whereupon Betty curtseyed, dimpled and withdrew, leaving him to shoot his ruffles, adjust his laced jabot and glance into the mirror a little anxiously, for now that the moment was at hand he was conscious of a vague unease, a growing apprehension that plagued and puzzled him: "How would she receive him?" Here was the question to which he found no answer. Thus, for once unsure of himself, he shot ruffles, adjusted cravat and glanced into the mirror all over again.

Then the door opened and she stood before him, a radiant vision, magnificently gowned, a glorious creature deep-eyed, red-lipped, vivid with youth and strength, a woman nobly shaped, assured and confident in her beauty. Proudly she swept towards him, closing the door behind her while he stared motionless and tongue-tied, overwhelmed by the majesty of her.

"Madam!" he murmured at last. "Herminia!" and he bowed.

"Sir!" said she, and sank down in billowing, gracious curtsey; but alas! as she arose her voluminous draperies caught up a three-legged stool; in freeing herself of this,

her panniers swept a china ornament crashing to the floor; in turning to scowl at the fragments, over went the little table, and, startled by its fall, she caught high heel in embroidered skirt and would have fallen but for Sir John's ready aid.

"Faith, my lady," he laughed, "we creatures of art be sadly out o' place among these homely things! Better my gentle Rose in her simple tire, thy rustical John in his homespun—"

"Loose me!" she cried passionately, and he was amazed to see he clasped a raging fury. "Let me go!" she repeated. Mutely he obeyed, and she fronted him, pale with anger and mortified pride.

"Nay, Herminia," he pleaded, "be it satin or merest rags, thou and only thou art she I love!" And he would have taken her hands, but she retreated with superb gesture and, catching the folds of her gown on the arm of a chair, ripped it irretrievably. At this final catastrophe she halted between laughter and tears, but, meeting his look, chose the third alternative.

"Sir, you . . . laugh at me, I think?"

"With thee, rather, my lady," he answered; "for, O Herminia, an ordinary cottage cramps and cannot hold us 't would seem, nay, the whole wide world were scarce great enough for such love as ours."

"I pray you speak for yourself, Sir John."

"Then hear me, Herminia, though verily my love transcends all speech and thought, for 't is of Infinity itself. With thee beside me life should become more worthy for thy sake . . . without thee 't were an emptiness, and death a lovely thing. Marry me, Herminia; see here upon my knees I supplicate."

For a long moment Herminia was speechless because of her heart's tumultuous beating, her cheeks aglow, her eyes very tender beneath their drooping lashes; but from Sir John, thus kneeling in his new humility, her glance wandered to the shattered china ornament, the overturned chair, the jagged rent in her gown, and from

her parted lips trilled sudden laughter, and, or ever she might check it, Sir John was upon his feet, viewing her beneath wrinkling brows, coldly curious.

"Ah, my Lady Barrasdaile," said he softly, "in this sorry world are to be found miserable wretches who, to vent their puny spite, will foully desecrate the holiest of holies. . . . My love was a holy thing, and you, for your foolish pride's sake, would make a mock of it. Here, Madame, I read the grand culmination o' your empty vengeance. Well, so be it. But I tell you that 'The Wicked Dering' at his worst could never sink to such depths as yours — " At this she turned and would have left him, but his out-thrust arm stayed her. "One moment longer, Madame!" he commanded. "Your vengeance is complete, but . . . my bitterest scorn goeth with you now and — "

"Your scorn!" she cried in choking voice; and, seizing his arm that still barred her escape, she wrenched and twisted it in furious hands until he winced with the pain of it. "Your scorn!" she panted. "You whose hands are red with blood!"

"God's love, Madame!" quoth he between pallid lips. "And was it you indeed who with her own body would ha' shielded me from an assassin's stroke?"

"And is it you would remember a moment of hysteria?" she retorted passionately.

Sir John recoiled.

"Hysteria?" he stammered, perplexed. "Hysteria? And was it so, indeed? Nay — nay, Madame, what mean ye?"

"That the irresistible Sir John Dering hath met one woman at the least who doth not succumb to his wiles and blandishments."

"Unworthy!" he exclaimed. "Oh, base and most unworthy!"

But now, the door open at last, she fled from him and up the narrow stair. . . . And after some while Sir John took hat and cloak and stumbled forth into the

golden afternoon, but for him it might have been blackest midnight.

Her Grace of Connington, returning at last by way of the wicket gate, stole into the little house, her bright eyes a little brighter even than usual; but in the act of laying off her sun-bonnet, paused, arrested by a sound from the chamber overhead, and, running up the stair with surprising agility, discovered my Lady Herminia face down upon the floor among the ruin of her crumpled finery.

"Why, Herminia . . . dear child!" she cried. "O my love . . . my precious soul — what is it?"

"Aunt," sobbed my lady without lifting her woeful head, "O aunt . . . I've trampled him . . . triumphantly . . . at last!"

## CHAPTER XLI

### Telleth of the Duel on Dering Tye

Reaching the old cross, Sir John paused instinctively and leaned there, oblivious to all but this most bitter of truths. She had acted . . . from the very first! The gentle Rose with her sweet simplicity was no more than a figment of his own imagining. The cold, vindictive Herminia had lured him on for this. . . . Here, indeed, was the culmination of her heartless scheming. Her vengeance was accomplished. . . . And Rose had never existed!

Here, lifting clenched hand, he saw a slow trickle of blood that crept beneath lace ruffle. . . . She had said his hand was bloody . . . and to be sure she had gripped and wrenched his injured arm.

Now as he leaned thus against the cross, watching these slow-creeping drops, he became aware of hoofs approaching at a wild gallop, and, glancing up, espied a horseman who rode very furiously, and it was with a faint surprise that he recognised Mr. Hartop; on came the parson, spurring his plump steed mercilessly, until, perceiving Sir John, he abated his speed somewhat.

"Sir — sir," he cried, his voice thin and high, "they are killing the witch . . . old Penelope Haryott! The mob is out . . . my Lord Sayle will do nothing. They 've wrecked her cottage. . . . I 'm for Sir Hector MacLean and any who are men . . . pray God we be in time! You, sir — quick, I beseech . . . High Dering."

"Sayle?" repeated Sir John. "Is he there?"

"Sir, 't was by his orders they ransacked her cottage seeking the man Potter. . . . God help the poor soul! Haste, sir, if ye would be o' service!"

Next moment Sir John was before the Market Cross Inn shouting for horse, ostlers and the Corporal.

"Sir?" questioned the imperturbable Robert, hurrying downstairs.

"To horse, Bob, at once! Nay, first my sword with the rapier blade!" And, unhooking the gold-hilted weapon at his side, Sir John tossed it upon the table.

"The one you bid me sharpen, sir?"

"Yes, yes — and hurry, man, 't is life and death!" And away hasted Sir John to see the horses saddled, to mount and fume at the ostlers until the Corporal came running, the sword beneath his arm.

"Is 't sharp, Bob, is 't sharp?" questioned Sir John, as he buckled the weapon on.

"As a razor, your honour, both edges, from the p'int six inches up — "

"Then up with ye and — spur, Bob!" The Corporal sprang to saddle, found his stirrups, and, wheeling the high-mettled animals, they dashed into the street and away at full gallop: and spur how he would, the Corporal had much ado to keep Sir John in sight.

Now presently, as they raced thus, they heard a distant sound that might have been wind in trees, a vague murmur that grew upon them with every stride, waxing ever louder and more terrible, a sound than which there is surely none more dreadful, the ferocious, inarticulate roar of an angry mob.

With this awful clamour in his ears, Sir John spurred his horse to yet faster pace; but across country he might save half a mile or so, therefore steadying the mare he set her at a gate, cleared it gallantly, and away pounded the sorrel at stretching gallop, taking dykes and brooks in her stride: across and over and through ditch and fence and hedge, swerving for nothing, staying for nothing, until, clearing hedge and ditch at mighty bound, her fast-galloping hoofs thundered upon dusty road again.

And presently Sir John saw the thatched roofs of High Dering, and then he was racing down its winding street; a moment more and he was upon the Tye or

village green where swayed a tumultuous, roaring crowd; and in the midst, her white head horribly bedabbled, a mark for every gibing tongue and merciless hand, reeled old Penelope Haryott.

And now a demon awoke in Sir John; his modish serenity was utterly gone, his eyes glared, his teeth gleamed between snarling lips and, spurring his rearing horse, he drove in upon the mob, striking savagely with heavy whip at the faces of such as chanced nearest: whereupon the full-throated roar changed to shouts of anger and dismay, to screams of pain and fear, to a whine. But, spurring upon the shrinking people, he lashed at them as they had been curs, until the heavy whip broke in his grasp, and like curs they ran before him, howling. Then chancing to espy Mr. Oxham, who stood beside Sturton before The Dering Arms, he wheeled and galloped up to them.

"Rogues!" he panted. "Where's your master?—where is Lord Sayle? . . . Tell him . . . Sir John Dering . . . awaits him."

"Sir John—Dering?" exclaimed Oxham, staring, while Mr. Sturton, uttering a gasping moan, sank down upon adjacent bench and bowed his head between clasping hands. And then Mr. Oxham was pushed aside and my Lord Sayle stepped from the inn.

Sir John lightly dismounted.

"Ah, my lord," quoth he, "so I find ye trespassing and murdering on my land."

"I am here, sir," retorted his lordship, scowling, "in the exercise of my duty. If your tenants be minded to duck a notorious witch, 't is no affair o' mine. And I warn ye, sir, that in yon old hag's cottage we have found indisputable evidence that—"

"Tush!" exclaimed Sir John, "do not weary me with the details o' your man-hunting trade, sir. Your arm is strong enough to flourish a whip, I perceive, and mine, you 'll observe, is less sound than it might be. Come, then, my lord—the grass is smooth and level on Dering

Tye — let us forthwith earnestly endeavour to make an end o' one another — for, by Heaven, I'll wait no longer!"

"Orme," cried his lordship, "ha' the goodness to bring my sword."

The Major hastened to obey and, taking the weapon, my lord stepped from under the porch to where Sir John awaited him; side by side they walked together, and together reached the smooth green, watched by the silent crowd, which slowly closed about them until they stood within a wide ring of hushed and awestruck spectators. Then Sir John tossed aside laced hat, drew his sword, tossed the scabbard after the hat, and, point to earth, watched his lordship do the same; but scarce was his blade free than Lord Sayle sprang with glittering point out-thrust, but Sir John, ever watchful, leapt nimbly aside, avoided the stroke, laughed, and steel met steel. And, standing thus, poised, alert, eyes glaring into eyes, blade pressing blade, Sir John spoke in his high, clear voice:

"A murderous trick, my lord, and worthy of ye. Now, look around you, note the beauty of this fair afternoon — 't is your last, my lord, for so sure as you hold sword, I mean to kill ye!"

The stamp of sudden foot, a flurry of twirling blades in thrust and parry, and they were motionless again.

"Kill and end ye, my lord!" repeated Sir John. "But first, for the behoof of our so numerous spectators, we will show 'em a few gasconading flourishes. Your coat, my lord, they shall see it flutter in merest rags about you ere we finish — thus! So ho, my lord, one — two!" A sudden whirl of close-playing steel, the flash of darting point, and now, as they thrust and parried, all eyes might see my Lord Sayle's brown velvet disfigured by two gaping rents from waist to hem, and from the watching throng rose a hoarse murmur of amazement. But my lord, nothing dismayed, fought but the more warily, while Sir John, it seemed, grew ever the more reckless;

ensued long periods of fierce action, thrust, parry, and counterthrust, followed by sudden pauses, tense moments of utter stillness wherein blade felt blade and eye glared to eye.

Foremost among the spectators loomed the gigantic figure of Sir Hector, his face suffused and damp, who babbled prayers as the murderous steel flashed and darted, while beside him stood Corporal Robert, deadly pale, who muttered fitful curses.

"Damme, sir, his arm's begun a-bleeding!" groaned the Corporal.

"Guid love us a'—so 't is!" exclaimed Sir Hector, seizing the Corporal by the collar; "an' O Rabbie—man, see how wild he is. . . . Sayle will hae him yet!" Here Sir Hector nearly swung the Corporal from his legs in his emotion.

For, indeed, Lord Sayle's point time and again flashed perilously near; once it flickered through the ringlets of Sir John's peruke, and once it tore the laces at his throat, but after every desperate rally it was to be noticed that my lord's brown velvet coat showed ever more woefully tattered.

Suddenly, albeit a little breathlessly, Sir John spoke, plain for all to hear:

"So much for your coat, my lord! And now for yourself—let us make an end . . . you shall receive your quietus on the count of three. . . . One! Two!" A sudden clashing of desperate steel, then my lord leapt out of distance and, uttering a hoarse cry of bitter despair, hurled his useless sword from him and stood dreadfully pale, bathed in sweat, and, striving to voice his passionate hate, gasped mouthing incoherencies.

"Take up your sword, sir—take up . . . your sword and . . . let us finish!" panted Sir John. But Lord Sayle folded his arms, staring upon his antagonist with eyes of murder.

Then Sir John laughed.

"What, have ye enough, sir?" he questioned scorn-

fully. "Are ye done so soon and never a drop o' blood, nor so much as a scratch?" Receiving no answer, he laughed again and turned his back. "Robert," he cried —"Robert, see the pitiful fellow off my land."

Stung to madness, Lord Sayle reached swiftly for his fallen sword, but the Corporal was before him and, snapping the weapon across his knee, tossed the pieces aside.

"My lord," said he, "your horse is yonder, I think."

Lord Sayle raised haggard face from earth to sky, stared round him upon the gaping throng with expression bordering on despair, and strode whither the Corporal's finger pointed. And, as he went, the skirts of his brown velvet coat fluttered grotesquely about him, yet of all who watched, no one spoke, much less laughed. Reaching his horse, he mounted and, without one backward glance, gathered up the reins and, spurring savagely, galloped away, leaving his friends and servants to follow as they would.

"And now, Hector," said Sir John, catching up his hat, "what of old Penelope? How is she?"

"Guid forgi'e me, Johnnie, I clean forgot the puir soul."

Reaching the little cottage, they found its new-planted garden a trampled wilderness, its windows shattered, its newly painted door battered from its hinges, and within, a scene of cruel wreckage.

"Ah, well," laughed Sir John fiercely, "my Lord Sayle yet lives!" And then was a light foot suddenly set upon the dark stair and my Lady Herminia faced them, very pale.

"Guid be thankit ye're here, my bonny Rose!" exclaimed Sir Hector fervently. "Hoo is yon puir Penelope?"

"Alive, sir! You were in time, I thank God. I have put her to bed and shall remain with her. I pray you bid my aunt to me hither and the maid Betty."

"Ah, Rose," cried Sir Hector, catching my lady's hands

and kissing them, "thou bonny, muckle-hearted lass! O Johnnie, was there e'er sic a maid as our Rose?"

"Never, Hector — there never was! For Gad's my life, Rose is not, was not, nor ever will be —"

"Eh — eh, Johnnie?"

"The lady before us, Hector, is merely that blooming 'toast' the bewitching Barrasdaile."

"Losh, man John, wha's a' this?"

"This, Hector, is the Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, niece to her Grace the Duchess of Connington, whom we know here as 'Mrs. Saunders.' But as for our loved Rose, alas, she was no more than a passing whim!"

"Why — why . . . O John!" stammered Sir Hector, loosing my lady's nerveless hands and falling back a step in sheer amazement. "O Rose, my bonny Rose, wha's a' this?" he questioned.

"The truth, sir," she answered gently, "I am indeed Herminia Barrasdaile. And now, by your leaves, I will go back to old Penelope."

And so, with a gracious curtesy, my lady turned and went softly up the dark and narrow stair.

## CHAPTER XLII

### Mr. Dumbrell Mediates

The news of my Lord Sayle's shameful discomfiture on Dering Tye ran and spread like wildfire; in town, village and hamlet near and far it was the one topic of conversation, in busy market-place, at cross-roads and sequestered lane, it was discussed; and ever the story grew.

Dering of Dering was back home again and had forced Lord Sayle to fight, and cut Lord Sayle's clothes from him piecemeal and left him stark naked as he was born! So ran the story to the accompaniment of thumping pewter and gusty laughter, and proud was the man who could boast of having witnessed, with his own two eyes, the never-to-be-forgotten scene.

It is to be supposed that my Lord Sayle caught some faint echo of the tale, for by day he held himself sullenly aloof, shunned alike by dismayed friends and trembling servants; but at night, unseen, unheard, who shall tell the agonies he endured, who describe the passionate despair, the mortified pride, the futile rage and burning hate that rent and tore him? All hell raged within his soul, a hell peopled by demons that tortured him until came the arch-devil of Vengeance luring him to his own destruction, urging him to that black gulf whence there is no return. So made he Vengeance his comforter.

Yes, Dering of Dering was home again and, mindful of the treatment it had accorded John Derwent, High Dering was aghast; its women lamented to all and sundry, its men shook gloomy heads, but none more despondent than Thomas Nixon, landlord of The Dering Arms.

"To think," sighed he, "to think as I stood 'ere an' watched Sir John turned out o' his very own inn off his very own land! Mak's me goo arl 'ot and shiversome it du, neighbours!"

"But then 'ow was 'ee to know 't was 'im, Tom?" quoth one of his hearers. "'Ow was any on us to know?"

"Bah!" snarled the ancient Dumbrell, rapping the table with his knobbed stick and getting upon quavering legs. "Everybody 'old their tongues an' 'ark to oi!"

"Aye, but 'ow was anybody to know, Gaffer? 'Ow?"

The Aged Soul snorted disdainfully.

"Ow was you t' know?" he repeated. "Whoy by instink fur sure, same as oi did! What if 'e called hisself Derwent an' wore a little wig an' no goold braid onto 'is 'at? Oi knowed 'e wur quality moment oi seed 'im, oi did, fur a gen'leman be arlways a gen'leman!"

"Why that be true enough, Gaffer, but —"

"Hesh!" snarled the Aged Soul. "Don't goo fur to arg' wi' oi! As fur you, Tom Nixon, 'whatsoever a man sows that shall 'e rip!' You let 'em turn Sir John Dering out o' The Dering Arms an' it be only nat'ral as Sir John Dering 'll turn you out likewise."

"Doan't 'ee say so, Gaffer!" pleaded the mournful landlord.

"But oi du say so, Tom . . . turned out ye'll be sure-lye, sarten-sure-indeed, my pore lad, ah — an' mebbe hung or trans-ported . . . unless oi can say a word fur 'ee to Sir John hisself next toime 'e hap along to see me."

"Lemme fill your pot again, Gaffer — do now!" urged the doleful Mr. Nixon.

"No, no, Tom!" answered the Aged Soul sternly. "I dunno as I ought to drink wi' ye at arl — considerin', that oi doan't!"

Here Mr. Nixon groaned, and at this juncture the Corporal was seen approaching, at sight of whom the landlord's depression increased and he looked appealingly at the little old man, whereupon that Aged Soul waxed suddenly magnanimous.

"Arl roight, Tom, arl roight!" quoth he, encourageingly. "Sir John be a friend o' moine, an' so 's Corporal Bob. I dunno as oi wun't put in a word fur 'ee — leave it arl to oi!"

Thus the Corporal, walking with head bowed as one in profound reverie, heard himself hailed in piping, imperious tones, in answer to which he approached slowly and somewhat unwillingly.

"Mus' Robert," quoth the old man, "'ere be Tom Nixon as stood by whiles Sir John Dering an' you was turned out o' this here inn o' Sir John Dering's an' consequently ought to be turned out loikewise immejit, an' 'ung an' jibbeted or transported! But oi moind Tom bein' barn, an' a bit of a fule 'e 's been ever since, an' consequent I be axin' you to ax Sir John to forget an' forgive pore Tom an' suffer 'im to boide on 'ere arl-along-on-account-of pore Tom bein' naun but a bit fule, d' ye see?"

"Why as to that, Gaffer," answered the Corporal, his glance roving afar, "I ray-ther think Sir John's forgot the incident, anyway he don't bear malice."

"Meanin' as 'e wun't turn pore Tom out?"

"I 'm pretty sure he won't," answered the Corporal, his gaze still abstracted.

"An' theer ye be, Tom lad!" quoth the Aged Soul triumphantly. "See what oi 've done fur 'ee an' be dooly grateful."

"I be, Gaffer!" answered Mr. Nixon, his gloom lifted from him. "Lemme fill your pot again. An' you, Mus' Doubleday, what 'll ye tak', sir?"

"Nothing, thank ye, Nixon," returned the Corporal, and his roving glance perceiving the flutter of a petticoat further down the lane, he saluted the company and turned away.

"Robert," cried the Aged Soul, admonishing finger uplifted, "if so be ye hap' to meet my Nan, doan't 'ee nowise say nothin' about this 'ere liddle drop o' ale, moind!"

"Not a word, Gaffer!" answered the Corporal, and strode away.

He found her demurely seated upon rustic bench in the little garden, busied with her needle and rather more shyly surprised to see him than usual.

"Why, Mus' Doubleday," she exclaimed as he opened the gate, "you be two hours afore your usual toime to-day!"

"Two hours four an' one-half minutes, Mrs. Ann," he answered, consulting the ponderous watch he carried.

"Well, wun't 'ee come an' sit down, sir?"

"Thank 'ee, Mrs. Ann, I will . . . but where, mam?"

"Here for sure!" she answered, drawing her neat gown aside and tapping the rustic seat with one finger. So the Corporal laid by his hat and, seating himself beside her, remained for a space apparently lost in contemplation of his riding-boots.

"You be very silent, Mus' Robert."

"Aye . . . I'm thinking, mam."

"What about?" she inquired softly, stealing a sly glance at his down-bent face.

"I was a-thinking, mam, as this be a world o' change. Aye, life has changed and is a-changing for me con-siderable!"

"What do 'ee mean, sir?"

"I mean, Mrs. Ann, that I have lost my place as Sir John's valet—"

"Lost it!" she exclaimed aghast. "Lost it—O Mus' Doubleday!" Her sewing fell to the ground, and he would have picked it up but her hand on his arm checked him. "Lost it?" she questioned again, whereupon he turned away lest she might read his truthful eyes.

"Aye, Mrs. Ann," he mumbled brokenly. "Sir John hath discharged me; he . . . he don't want me for his valet any longer, d' ye see. . . ." The Corporal heard a soft, inarticulate cry, and then her arms were around his neck.

"Mus' Doubleday . . . O Robert!" she whispered. "There, there, never grieve, then—doan't 'ee! There 's me left . . . arlways me . . . an' I shan't never change."

For a moment he sat motionless, then, forgetting his imperturbability altogether, Corporal Robert clasped and drew her to his kisses; and between the two of them they

mightily ruffled his neat wig, whereupon he snatched it off altogether.

"Wait a bit, lass — wait!" he exclaimed, with a catch in his voice. "Look, Ann, see how grey my hair is! I'm too old for ye, my sweet maid. . . . O Ann, I'm forty-five and —"

"Why, Bob," she cried, between laughing and crying, "as if age mattered — doan't 'ee be fullish! An' if your 'air be a bit grey-like, 't is so I do love it best!" And, drawing his head down, she kissed him upon each temple where the hair was greyest. "And so, dear Robert, if you 've lost your place wi' Sir John Dering you 've — found me!"

"O Ann — my sweet," said the Corporal, his voice more unsteady than ever, "listen a bit more! 'T is true Sir John hath discharged me . . . I mean as his valet, but — O Ann . . . he 's made me his bailiff instead!"

"Bailiff?" she gasped. "D' ye mean the same as Mus' Sturton was? Wi' horses to ride . . . an' a fine house —"

"And you in it, Ann — you in it to make it home. Though you 're much too young for a wife . . . or I 'm much too old —"

"O Bob!"

## CHAPTER XLIII

### In Which Sir John Devotes Himself to the Muse

Dering of Dering being home again and his fame on every lip, it befell, to Sir John's dismay, that the Market Cross Inn was generally a-throng with visitors: sporting farmers who trotted up on their "bits o' blood", country gentry, bucks of the quality, and not a few ladies of fashion, all hither come to pay homage in their several ways to "The Wicked Dering."

To avoid whom, Sir John promptly shut himself above stairs attended by the Corporal, admitting none but Mr. Bunkle, adventuring abroad only after dark. His injured arm still irked him, but this he accounted nothing compared with the hurt he had suffered at my lady's hands.

In this situation he devoted the daylight hours to the Muse, and penned many and divers satyric pieces concerning men and manners in general and Woman in particular, with a view to publication in *The Satyric Spy, or Polite Monitor;* while his lampoon on the Sex entitled, "The Jade Equine and Feminine; or the Horse the Nobler Animal", progressed apace.

It was then upon a sunny afternoon that he laid down his pen to stare at floor and ceiling and walls, and finally at Corporal Robert busied with books of accounts at a small table in adjacent corner.

"Bob," said he, with a yearning glance towards the open casement, "a guinea — five guineas for a suitable rhyme to Herminia!" Hereupon the Corporal glanced up, scratched his wig, rolled his eyes, and presently hazarded:

"'Within ye,' your honour?"

"'T is n't grammar, Bob."

"What o' 'Lavinia,' sir?"

"Rhymes truly but won't suit."

"I can't think of any other, sir."

"Neither can I, Bob . . . 'tis the devil of a name!"

"Then why not choose another, sir?"

"Hum!" quoth Sir John. Here silence again, then: "What are ye doing there, Bob?"

"Going through estimates for repairs o' cottages at High Dering and Selmeston, your honour."

"Then take 'em for a walk. . . . She will help ye, Bob."

"Aye, sir, she can write as plain as I can, and a wondrous 'ead for figures — so mar-vellous quick, sir, and —" Here, meeting Sir John's quizzical glance, the Corporal checked and actually flushed.

"And a pretty head it is, Bob! When are ye going to get married?"

"We thought two months from now, your honour." Here Sir John sighed and glanced out of the window.

"I hope you'll be happy, Bob."

"Thank 'ee, sir. I'm pretty sure o' that."

Here Sir John sighed more deeply than before, then frowned as upon the door was a rapping of peremptory knuckles.

"I'll see nobody!" quoth he. "No one, you understand!" Here a louder knocking than ever. "Dammem, see who dares thus intrude, Bob." Obediently the Corporal unlocked, unbolted and opened the door, when he was immediately caught up, lifted aside and Sir Hector strode in.

"Losh, Johnnie man," quoth he, "here's four days by an' never a glimpse o' ye! An' wherefore?"

"Because I detest being a raree show to be stared at by the curious idle, for one thing. And because I desire solitude for another, Hector."

"Solitude, is it? Umph-humph! An' what o' a' your loving frien's?"

"Meaning yourself, Hector?"

"Ou aye, there's ever mysel', John; forbye, there's ithers, ye ken —"

"Begging your pardon, sir," said the Corporal, taking

his hat, "I'll step along, then, if I may, your honour?" And at a nod from Sir John he departed, closing the door carefully behind him, which Sir John promptly locked and bolted.

"I say, there's ithers, John!" repeated Sir Hector, seating himself by the open casement.

"Why, there is Corporal Robert; other friends have I none, Hector."

"Dinna be a muckle fule, John! Ye ken vera weel there's Mrs. Saund— I mean the . . . Her, for one, and — abune a', lad, there's that sweet, gentle maid —"

"Whom can you mean, Hector?"

"I mean Rose, an' weel ye ken it."

"Rose doth not exist."

"Well, Herminia, then. She loves ye, Johnnie."

"Hector, you rave!"

"I tell ye she loves an' is grieving for ye —"

"A fiddlestick, Hector!"

"The de'il awa' wi' ye! I say she's breakin' her heart for ye, John!"

"Impossible! She hath no heart. She is naught but selfish pride, a creature hard and cold, soulless and fickle . . . in fine, a very woman! And talking o' The Sex, I have here a small effort in verse that I venture to think is somewhat felicitous. Hark 'ee and judge!" And, selecting one of the many sheets of manuscript before him, Sir John read as follows:

> "Old Satan womankind did plan
> To be the bane and plague of man,
> And woman since the world began
> Hath been so.
> For, be she, more than common, fair
> She is but Satan's chiefest snare.
> Wherefore, then, of her wiles beware:
> They bring woe."

"Hoot, awa'!" ejaculated Sir Hector indignantly. "'T is rankest blasphemy!"

"'T is very truth! And faith, it reads better than I thought. Mark this line, Hector, 'She is but Satan's chiefest snare.' 'T is apt, Hector; 't is well expressed and should commend itself to all philosophers! Now, hear the rest — nay, you must and shall! 'T is brief, yet pithy." And Sir John read forthwith:

> "Therefore, who 'd lead a quiet life,
> Unmarred by turmoil, care and strife,
> Avoid that dreadful thing called 'wife';
> She 'll plague you!
> Thus, is she as Aurora fair;
> Or eke like night her raven hair,
> 'Stead of her I would choose, I swear,
> The ague."

"How think you of it, Hector?"

"That it should burn!"

"Nay, rather in due season shall it lighten the page of *The Satyric Spy, or Polite Monitor.* Indeed and verily, Hector, you were right and I was wrong, for women, as you once truly said, are the devil!"

Sir Hector's keen gaze wavered for once, and he stirred uneasily in his chair.

"John," quoth he, slowly, precise in his English, "if ever I voiced such damnable heresy, which I gravely doubt, I ha' forgot it, long since, as a man and a MacLean should."

"Forgot it, Hector? Amazing! You that have ever held Woman in such disdainful abhorrence!"

"And suppose I did, sir?" retorted Sir Hector, flushing. "A MacLean may change his mind and be the better of it. . . . And how may I help but revere and admire The Sex with such an example as Rose, her sweet and gentle ways — "

"But Rose never was!" sighed Sir John.

"Herminia, then!" snapped Sir Hector.

"Not to mention her aunt!" murmured Sir John.

At this, Sir Hector glared and made to rise, but, meet-

ing Sir John's whimsical look, feeling his hand upon the sleeve of the second-best coat, Sir Hector flushed, his gaze sought the green of the chestnut tree beyond the open window, and his grim lips curved to a smile.

"And . . . O man, tae think she's — a duchess! 'T is awfu', Johnnie, awfu'!"

"Alas, Hector, to think she is a woman, and this is worse. A woman, Hector, and therefore to be avoided. For, how saith your bard?

"'She is but Satan's chiefest snare.'"

"Umph — humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector, and rose. "Aweel, lad," he sighed, "I dinna ken wha' bee's in y'r bonnet regardin' yon sweet Rose, but — "

"Lady Herminia!" Sir John corrected.

"But look'ee, lad, had it not been for Herminia's loving, tender care, Penelope Haryott would ha' died. . . . And, talking o' good women, John, if ever there was one, it is Penelope."

"She knew my father, it seems."

"She did, John."

"She once showed me two miniatures. . . ."

"Aye, I mind your father having 'em done. Her likeness he kept always . . . it was upon his breast the day he died! 'T was that which turned the bayonet into his heart! . . . He gave his earliest and, I think, his best love to Penelope, and she but a cottager's daughter born on his estate and twelve years his senior. But she was beautiful beyond the ordinary, and good as she was clever, and he wooed vainly . . . even when he would ha' married her she would not . . . because he was Dering of Dering and she only her pure, humble self. . . . So, in time he wed your mother . . . and died in my arms . . . murmuring — 'Penelope!' Ah, John lad, if by reason of some misunderstanding your heart be sore, never decry Woman . . . for here, truly, was one of the purest and most selfless, noblest of creatures!"

Being alone, Sir John sat thoughtful awhile; at last he reached for his manuscript, tore it slowly across and across, and threw it into the fireplace; then, evening being at hand, he took hat and stick, and, descending by a back stair, sallied forth into the fragrant dusk.

## CHAPTER XLIV

### In Which the Ghost Flits to Good Purpose

It was dark as he reached the old stile hard by the little footbridge, and, perceiving a shrouded form thereby, halted suddenly; but as he peered, uncertain, a soft voice spoke:

"John!" He drew back hastily; the figure moved towards him. "Sir John Dering?" Off came Sir John's hat in a moment, and he bowed profoundly.

"Gad's my life!" he exclaimed. "Do I indeed behold your ladyship? Bide you still i' the country, madam? A fair good-night to you!" And he turned away, only to find her beside him.

"Why—why will you hazard your life thus wantonly?" she questioned. "Nay, sir, do not prevaricate; I know 't is your custom to walk thus solitary of a night."

"Your ladyship's interest flatters me!" he murmured.

"Surely, sir," said she, in the same calm and gentle tones, "life is not to be thus lightly jeopardised."

"Tush, madam," he laughed, "you grow hysterical again 't would seem, and 't is a weakness of your charming sex that I have ever found extreme embarrassing, not to say wearisome. I suggest a pill . . . a bolus and sleep, madam. Aye, sleep is the thing . . . you shall find your megrims gone i' the morning. So sleep you soundly, madam, and farewell!" Having said which, he bowed and departed, leaving her to watch him through slow-gathering tears. And suddenly, finding herself thus deserted, she bowed her stately head upon the old stile, wetting its ancient timbers with her tears and weeping so unfeignedly that she actually sniffed, though to be sure there was none to hear.

Meanwhile Sir John, striding his solitary way, looked up at the stars and smiled happily.

"She cares!" quoth he within himself. "By all the

saints in heaven, she cares!" And, halting suddenly, he glanced back, minded to return. "Either she loves me, or here was marvellous good play-acting . . . which, now?" Here he went on again, though very slowly, and coming to a gate, leaned there to debate the point.

My lady, reaching the cottage, paused awhile, also with gaze uplifted, but saw the starry firmament blurred by smarting tears.

"Alas," sighed she, "he never loved me or he would have known! He is but the heartless Sir John Dering after all!"

"The question being," said Sir John within himself, his gaze yet uplifted to the firmament, "is she truly—"

The stars seemed to shoot wildly from their courses, the earth to sway giddily beneath his feet, then to plunge horribly down and down into a roaring blackness.

He awoke to a sense of pain, jolting and strangulation; slowly he became aware that he lay bound hand and foot across the withers of a horse, and with his mouth crammed almost to suffocation with a thing he took to be a neckerchief.

And after some while he was conscious of two voices wrangling together, voices these that sounded vaguely familiar; and the first was hoarse and sullen, the second sharp and querulous.

THE FIRST VOICE: An' whoy not, I sez?

THE SECOND VOICE: Because I won't have it.

THE FIRST VOICE: An' 'oo be you t' say no? I be good a man as you, aye an' better! Ain't I follered an' follered 'im, waitin' my chance? Was n't it me as got 'im at last? Well then, I sez we ought to finish an' mak' sure.

THE SECOND VOICE: And I say no!

THE FIRST VOICE: My lord bid us mak' sure, did n't 'e?

THE SECOND VOICE: He 'll be sure enough once aboard ship.

THE FIRST VOICE: An' I tell ye 'e be better dead.

THE SECOND VOICE: And I say, I 'll ha' no more bloodshed.

All about him was the tramp of feet muffled upon grass; and sometimes it seemed they laboured uphill and sometimes down, but always these two voices disputed, now waxing so loud and clear that he seemed on the point of recognising them, now blurred and indistinct, sinking to a murmur, a whisper, until they were not, and it seemed he was asleep and plagued by nightmare. It was after one of these many lapses that he was conscious the painful jolting had ceased, felt himself dragged roughly from the horse's back, and had a dim vision of many legs that hemmed him in as he lay upon the grass.

"Ain't dead, is 'e?" inquired a hearty voice, faintly interested.

"Dead — no, dang 'im!" answered the Sullen Voice, and a foot spurned him savagely. "Dead — not 'im! Though 'e ought to be, aye an' would be, if I 'ad my way."

"Easy, mate, easy!" admonished the Hearty Voice.

"Hold y'r tongue, you do!" cried the Querulous Voice. "Hold your tongue for a bloody-minded rogue or — "

"Avast, shipmates!" quoth the Hearty Voice. "Throat-slittin' be a ticklish business."

"Yah — dead men doan't talk!"

"Mebbe not, mate, but live-un's do! An' then there be ghosts, shipmates, ghosts, d' ye see."

"When can ye take him aboard?" demanded the Querulous Voice.

"Why the tide wun't sarve for 'arf an hour yet. Plenty time to finish my pipe. . . . An' talkin' o' ghosts, there was my mate Jerry Banks as was knifed aboard the *Belle Fortun*' . . . pore Jerry's ghost used to come an' sit o' nights perched aloft on our mainyard an' mew like a cat! Aye, mew 'e would, an' carry on that mournful 'twas 'orrible, mates — "

"Hold your tongue!" cried the Querulous Voice.

"Aye, we doan't want none o' your ghosts, do us, lads?" quoth the Sullen Voice; whereupon was a mutter of hearty assent.

"Why, very well," answered he of the hearty voice, spitting, "only if you'd a-heered the ghost o' pore Jerry . . . used to mew like any cat, it did, only more dismal-like. . . . I never 'eered nothing in all my days so shiver-some and —" The Hearty Voice ended in a hiss of breath suddenly in-drawn and thereafter was utter silence, a strange, unnatural stillness wherein it seemed that none moved or breathed; and then rose a hoarse, stammering whisper:

"Lord . . . O Lord a' mercy! What's yon?"

Turning heavy head, Sir John saw about him a huddle of crouching men who all peered in the one direction, heard an incoherent, passionate muttering that changed to a groan, a gasping cry, and a man rose to his knees with rigid arms outthrust, staggered to his feet and leapt down the grassy steep; hereupon the others awoke to sudden action; ensued a desperate scrambling, a wild babblement, a thudding of desperate feet, and Sir John lay staring on the empty dark alone save for the horse that cropped the grass near by. And then he too saw a vague and awful shape outlined in pale fire that flitted unheard upon the gloom and vanished, only to reappear as suddenly, gliding back up the slope to where he lay. And watching the thing approach, Sir John felt his flesh creep and he shivered with a growing dread that mocked at sanity and reason until he strove desperately against his bonds but, finding this vain, lay still again, watching. On it came, looming more gigantic and frightful with every yard, nearer still, until he could distinguish the monstrous head surmounted by wide-spreading, fiery horns, nearer, until from this awful shape a whispering voice reached him.

"Be that Sir John Dering? Be ye there, sir?" Then the dreadful thing swayed, stooped upon itself, thudded to earth, and in its place was a tall, broad-shouldered man who, running forward, knelt and began to cut and loose off Sir John's galling bonds. "Gagged ye too, 'ave they!" quoth the voice, and next moment Sir John,

relieved of the gag, reached out fumbling hand and spoke:

"Mr. Potter — O George Potter, though you come like a demon o' darkness, a very devil, yet no angel could be more welcome!"

"Why, sir, Potter frit' they rogues praper, I rackon. They cut off amazin' quick, an' they ain't like to come back — an' yet they may. So up wi' ye, sir, an' quick 's the word!" Sir John arose but, clapping hand to head, reeled weakly. "Be your 'ead 'urted bad, sir?"

"Nothing to mention, thanks to my hat and wig."

"Can ye ride, sir?"

"Easier than walk."

"Well, up it is, then!" And, half lifting Sir John to the saddle, Mr. Potter laid a shapeless bundle across the withers and they set off together.

"How came you so fortunately to my relief, George?"

"Well, sir, I happed to be a-waitin' for Mus' Sturton an' . . . t' other 'un, meanin' to frutten Sturton away an' get t' other 'un alone if so might be, when 'long comes 'alf a dozen chaps wi' this 'ere 'orse an' you acrost it, though I did n't know 't was you then, sir. But suddent-like, t' other 'un says, 'Why not finish 'im an ha' done?' 'e says. 'Because I wun't 'ave it!' says Sturton, very determinated."

"'T' other 'un' being the man Jonas Skag, I think?" inquired Sir John.

"Why, sir, I wun't deny it. Well, sir, they stops purty nigh wheer I wur a-hidin' to arg' the matter, an' I soon found 't was you they was a-quarrellin' over. An' presently on they goes an' me creepin' arter 'em bidin' a chance to do what I might."

"By means of your horns and bullock's hide, George?"

"Aye, this 'ere!" answered Mr. Potter, laying his hand upon the shapeless bundle. "A good friend it 's been to pore Potter, sir. Ghosts be useful things hereabouts."

"So I have observed!" smiled Sir John. "And, indeed, you were a terribly convincing ghost."

"Naun so bad, sir," admitted Mr. Potter modestly. "I done my best off an' on. Though I don't like hauntin' in the open — gimme a wall! Ye see, some folks be apt to shoot . . . there be four or five bullet-'oles in this 'ere ghost arlready!"

Talking thus, they at last reached the highroad, and Sir John saw the lights of Alfriston twinkling before them. Here the discreet Mr. Potter stopped and, lifting finger to eyebrow, bade Sir John good-night.

"You 'll be arl right now, I rackon, sir," said he.

But Sir John reached down to grasp his hand.

"You know who I am, I think?" he questioned.

"Aye, Sir John, you be Dering o' Dering."

"And a magistrate besides, George Potter, a Justice o' the Peace and Quorum."

"And I be Potter the smuggler, sir."

"And a man, George! And 't is as such that I shall always know you, so — give me your hand, friend George!"

So, in the gloom, hand met and grasped hand.

"Lord, sir," quoth Mr. Potter, "I dunno as I bean't a bit . . . glad-loike, you callin' Potter your friend an' arl —"

"Why then, George, pray tell me why do you seek Jonas Skag so earnestly?"

"Well, from what I be hearin' . . . an' likewise addin' two an' two, I rackon Jonas knows more 'n a bit about that theer false signallin' . . . an' if so be I find 'e do . . . why then, sir — why then —"

"Well?"

"No matter, sir — mum for that. But I rackon 'e wun't betray no lads to theer deaths never no more!"

"What do you mean, George?"

"Nothin' 't arl, sir. . . . Only, talkin' o' ghosts, rackon I made a pretty tidy 'un, but the fire were old Pen's idee, though she calls it phross-phross." So saying, Mr. Potter shouldered his bundle and trundled off in the gloom of the hedge, leaving Sir John to ride thoughtfully into Alfriston.

## CHAPTER XLV

### Which, as the Reader Observes, Begins and Ends with My Lord Sayle

My Lord Sayle tugged at the bell-rope and thereafter stared out into the sunny garden again as he had done for so long; and presently, the door opening softly, a man-servant entered who, beholding thus suddenly my lord's intent face, checked, shrank back, and stood, the door in his hand, gazing with eyes of fearful wonder. At last, becoming aware of the servant's presence, my lord spoke, but preserving always his rapt expression:

"Is Major Orme in the house?"

"No, my lord . . . the Major left . . . early this morning, my lord."

"Well, Sir Roland Lingley?"

"My lord, he . . . went with the Major."

My Lord Sayle's black brows twitched slightly, but he never moved, staring always out upon the sunny garden like one who saw that which no other eyes might behold.

"They left no message?"

"None, my lord," answered the man-servant, drawing a soft pace backward as he watched the rigid face.

"Send Sturton to me."

"Yes, my lord."

"And hark 'ee! If I should ring again, see that Tom and Roger answer — themselves only!"

"Yes, my lord!" murmured the servant, shrinking again as with a last stealthy glance he went softly forth, closing the door gently behind him.

So Orme and Lingley had gone! Even they had deserted him at last! Well, so much the better . . . considering. But the smile that distorted my lord's mouth was evil to see.

And after some while the door opened and Mr. Sturton appeared, who, at sign from my lord, entered and closed the door.

"So — o — o!" said his lordship, dwelling upon the word while he stared into the haggard face before him. "You have failed — again, Sturton?"

"'Twas no fault o' mine, my lord; in another ten minutes we should ha' had him safe aboard ship — "

"Ship?" The word was almost a whisper, and yet James Sturton recoiled and his face seemed even more livid as he met the speaker's glance. "Fool!" continued my lord in the same dreadful, hushed voice. "Fool, in the corner yonder you will find a sheet o' crumpled paper . . . open and read it . . . read it — aloud!"

Looking whither my lord pointed, Mr. Sturton took up and smoothed the crumpled sheet, glanced at it and hesitated.

"Aloud, my lord?"

"Aloud, fool!"

Then, mumbling somewhat, Mr. Sturton read as follows:

> "Sir John Dering begs to say that unless my Lord Sayle is out of the country within forty-eight hours, Sir John proposes calling upon my Lord Sayle with the stoutest horse-whip to be found."

"And you said 'ship,' I think?" inquired my lord in the same strangled voice.

"My lord, once aboard that ship he would trouble your lordship never again."

"'Trouble me never again!'" murmured Lord Sayle. "He never will . . . he never shall . . . but a ship? No, no! . . . A ship? Pshaw! We know a better way and a surer — eh, Sturton?"

"Your — your lordship means?"

"Exactly what you are thinking, Sturton!" As he spoke, my lord crossed to a cabinet and, opening a

drawer, came back with a brace of pistols in his hands. Now, glancing from these murderous things to the face above, James Sturton flung out wild hands and started back.

"No, no!" he cried. "Not this way, my lord; I cannot!"

"You will!" nodded my lord gently. "You know very well he walks or rides frequently to High Dering of an evening — alone! It will be simple."

"My lord, I . . . I cannot!"

"Meaning you will not?"

James Sturton stared desperately about him at floor and ceiling and walls, but never once at the speaker's face; finally he spoke:

"I . . . I cannot, my lord."

"Ah!" said his lordship, and stood regarding Sturton with an expression of mild curiosity. "So you — refuse?"

"I do, my lord!" mumbled the wretched man.

"Knowing that I can hang you for the murderer you already are? Still, you — refuse?"

"My lord, I do. . . . I must. . . . I — I cannot do it!"

His lordship slowly and deliberately returned the weapons to the drawer, locked it, and stood awhile staring at the key in his hand.

"Why, then," said he at last, still intent upon the key, "perhaps you will be good enough to pull the bell." Mr. Sturton obeyed, but, chancing to catch a glimpse of my lord's face in the mirror, he glanced apprehensively towards the door with the wild glare of one who suddenly finds himself in a trap; but even as he stared at it, the door opened and two men entered. For a moment was deepest silence; then, without troubling to turn, my lord spoke:

"You will take this white-livered cur . . . strip him and — drive him out! Strip him — you understand!" Ensued riot and confusion; but, despite his cries and desperate struggles, James Sturton was seized and

dragged away at last; then my Lord Sayle, chin on breast, stared out into the sunny garden again.

Slowly the glory faded and the shadows deepened as evening approached, but surely never was there shadow so dark, so ominous, so evil to behold as that upon the face of my Lord Sayle. Now if, by some coincidence, he had chanced to be regarding the noble constellation of Orion, as was Corporal Robert Doubleday, surely no two pairs of eyes ever gazed upon Orion's glittering belt with expression so vastly different! For this evening the Corporal's eyes held a light all their own, his lean, brown face wore an expression of extraordinary gentleness, and as he strode blithely across fragrant meadow he even essayed to sing; to be sure, his voice was somewhat husky, and creaked a little uncertainly as by lack of use, but he sang perseveringly, none the less, an old marching song he had sung often in Flanders years ago, set to the tune of "Lilliburlero."

But, all at once, in the very middle of a note, he checked voice and foot together as forth from a hedge before him protruded a head and a pair of stalwart shoulders clad in an old frieze coat.

"Ha! Is that you, George Potter?"

"My own self, Mus' Robert. Might you ha' chanced to see a man . . . or, say, two . . . hereabouts, as you come along?"

"Not a soul!"

"Ah! An' wheer might Sir John Dering be now, Mus' Robert, d' ye s'pose?"

"I left him at The Cross, but he usually walks abroad of an evening."

"Aye, so 'e do, Mus' Robert . . . but . . . doan't 'ee let 'im goo out o' your sight this night."

"Why not? What d' ye mean, George?"

"Well, rackon it bean't no-wise 'ealthy-like for Sir John to goo a-walkin' to-night alone, ah — an' p'r'aps not then."

"And why? Ah . . . d' ye think —"

"Aye, I do think!" nodded Mr. Potter. "I think as mebbe Murder 'll be a-walkin' to-night."

"Murder?" repeated the Corporal, falling back a step. "Murder? What d' ye mean, man? — Speak plain."

"Why, then, I means plain murder."

"Who d' ye mean, George?"

"Well, there be them as wishes others dead, d' ye see — but mum! Only I should keep 'im safe indoors to-night if I was you."

"By God, d' ye say so, George?" cried the Corporal; and staying for no more, he set off at a run; and now, as he hasted thus, his feet seemed to beat out the awful word: mur-der, mur-der, and his thoughts were full of it.

Murder, indeed! But who shall plumb all the sullen deeps of a murderer's soul? Who comprehend the motives that speed him on? What ears but his may catch those demon voices that have eternally wooed and urged, argued and threatened, ceaselessly day and night, until he sees nothing, hears nothing, is conscious of nothing but the one purpose so gradually decided upon and, at last, so passionately desired. What normal intelligence may comprehend the mind of a murderer?

Watch him as he creeps forth upon his awful business, a dreadful, furtive creature seeking his unsuspecting victim. . . . Behold now the generous cock of his hat, his neat wig, his full-skirted coat of sober hue! Looked at from behind, he might be mistaken for an itinerant preacher of Quakerish persuasion, but seen from in front he can be nothing under heaven but the murderer he is in his soul.

Thus goes he, his every faculty so intent upon his ghastly work that he sees nothing, hears nothing of the Nemesis that dogs him in the shadows, pausing when he pauses, looking where he looks, going on again with him step for step, silent, purposeful aud so dreadfully patient.

So come they at last, the Murderer and his Nemesis,

to a leafy grove that all day long has rung with the joyous carolling of birds, but now, hushed and silent, is a place of gloom meet for dark and stealthy deeds. Within this place of shadow Murder creeps, seeking a place where, unseen, he may destroy, but always unconscious of the lurking shape of the Nemesis that flits ever behind him; suddenly he starts and crouches, to peer along the glimmering road, for upon the silence is the sound of a man's light tread coming at slow, unhurried pace — the footsteps of a man who dreams. . . . Stay! What other feet are those that come at such wild speed, nearer and nearer, until they slacken somewhat and a panting voice speaks:

"Your honour . . . I was a-coming. . . to meet ye."

"And in mighty haste, Bob!"

"Why . . . as to that, sir — 't is growing dark — "

"Since when were you afraid o' the dark, Bob?"

"Why — it looks like rain, sir."

"On the contrary, 't is a very fine night."

"Why, then — let us walk, your honour."

"Nay, I 'm minded to be alone."

"But, sir, I — "

"So go you in, Bob, and order supper."

"But, your honour, I — "

"Pray leave me, Robert."

"Why, sir — George Potter . . . he warned me that — "

"That what?"

"That 't was n't, as you might say, healthy for you hereabouts to-night, sir, and — "

"The thought charms me, Robert. And now — pray be gone."

"But, sir, if you 'll only — "

"Damme! Will ye go?"

A distressful sigh; the sound of heavy feet unwillingly retreating, feet that hesitate more than once ere they finally die away. And presently the light tread comes on again, slow and unhurried as before. Then

Murder, peering from the shadows, crouches low, raises and steadies right hand. . . .

A ringing shot from the denser gloom, a cry of amazement lost in strangling groan. . . . A second shot, louder, nearer . . . a dreadful gasping . . . a horrid thrashing among the underbrush . . . silence. Then Sir John, staring upon that place of horror, began to creep thither . . . was aware that men were running towards him, shouting to one another, and, without looking, knew these for Robert and George Potter, which last bore a small, covered lanthorn.

So, together, they entered the little grove, and presently came upon a stilly shape crouched face down among the underbrush; and beholding the three-cornered hat of generous cock, the neat wig, the wide-skirted coat, Mr. Potter whistled softly.

"Rackon Sturton's got it at last!" quoth he.

"Aye, but — there's another over here!" cried the Corporal from the denser shadows. "Aye — another o' them . . . and it looks — it looks like . . . bring the light!"

Coming where stood the Corporal, Mr. Potter bent down, lanthorn in hand, only to start to his feet again very suddenly.

"Lord!" he exclaimed in awestruck voice. "Why, lord, sirs, this 'un be Sturton, sure enough . . . aye, an' sure enough dead. . . . Rackon 'e won't never want no more. . . . But who — who lays over yonder?"

They came back to the first still form and, while Sir John held the lanthorn, Potter and the Corporal turned it over and, recoiling, stood mute a while and motionless; for there, scowling up at them in death as he had so often done in life, was the dead face of my Lord Sayle.

## CHAPTER XLVI

### Tells how Sir John Dering Fled the Down-Country

The ancient cross was casting its shadow far athwart the silent street, for it was very early and the sun but new-risen, therefore the birds were jubilant, raising a chorus of welcome to the new day; but Sir John, leaning out from his bed-chamber window, gazed down at the battered old cross very wistfully and sighed deep and often. To him presently entered Corporal Robert, bearing a valise.

"You ordered the chaise for half after four, Bob?"

"I did, sir."

"And you ha' told no one of my proposed departure . . . Sir Hector, for instance?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent!" murmured Sir John, and sighed immediately.

"I mentioned the matter to nobody, sir — except . . . Her, your honour."

"Her?" exclaimed Sir John, starting. "'S death, man, she is the very last person — hum! Whom d' ye mean, Bob? What 'her'?"

"The — one and only, sir . . . Ann, your honour."

"Ha! And d' you tell her — everything?"

"Well — very near, sir."

"And she still loves ye, Bob . . . art sure?"

"I venter so to believe, sir. She — she tells me so, your honour."

"A good woman's abiding love," sighed Sir John, "is a very precious thing to a man o' sentiment."

"Yes, sir."

"And extreme rare, Bob!" Here Sir John scowled at the old cross and became bitter all at once. "Aye,

indeed, true love in a woman is as hard to find as flies in winter or ice in summer, by heaven!"

"Indeed, sir?" answered Robert the Imperturbable. "Will you have your blue and silver in the valise or —"

"Damn my blue and silver!"

"Yes, sir. . . . Or shall I pack it in the trunk along o' —"

"Curse the trunk! Curse everything! I'm talking o' love!"

"Very good, your honour."

"And I say that women's love is a devilish shy thing, very apt to take wing and fly away. 'T is found but to be lost. 'T is a slight thing and very transient. Pluck it and it withers, grasp it and it crumbles to sorry dust, taste it and 't is ashes in the mouth. 'T is a bitter-sweet, an emptiness, a merest bagatelle, an apple o' Sodom!"

"Indeed, sir? And will you wear your light walking-sword with the silver —"

"Burn ye, Bob, are ye attending? I said an apple o' Sodom!"

"Why, your honour, it don't sound a very tasty fruit."

Sir John's gloomy features were lightened by a passing smile.

"Ah, well," he sighed, "Venus be kind to thee, Bob! . . . And to-day you begin your new duties. You will look to the comfort and welfare of the tenantry?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Aye, I'm sure you will."

"Though your honour will be sorely missed. . . And the old House o' Dering . . . all done up like noo, such paintin' and gildin' . . . and now to go empty still! Aye, High Dering will surely miss your honour."

"Never i' the world, Bob!"

"And Sir Hector will likewise miss ye, sir."

"Aye, he may."

"And I shall miss your honour."

"For a little while, mayhap."

"Always and ever, sir!"

"You will have a young and pretty wife soon, Bob."

"Aye . . . and she will miss ye too, sir — we shall both miss ye. . . . And there's — others, sir — "

"Who, pray?"

"Your lady, sir."

"I ha' no lady."

"I mean Mrs. Rose — "

"There is no such creature!"

"Well, sir, my Lady Barrasdaile, your honour, she will be — "

"Enough!" said Sir John in his haughtiest tone, and regarding the Corporal with his iciest air of fine-gentlemanly aloofness. "You may leave me, Robert!"

"But I've your honour's valise to pack, sir and — "

"Then you may pack it elsewhere . . . pray, leave me!"

The Corporal glanced furtively askance, and, noting the droop of Sir John's eyelids, the tilt of his chin, gathered up clothes and valise and, shaking gloomy head, departed forthwith.

Left alone, Sir John leaned pensively from the open casement again, to survey the deserted, winding street with its narrow pavements, its tiled roofs, its neat rows of houses, and the battered shaft of its age-worn cross rising stark against the sun's level beams, for it was in his mind that he might never behold this scene again, and he sighed more deeply than ever; then leaned suddenly to peer down the street, for upon the air was a sound of approaching feet that woke the echoes — heavy feet that strode masterfully; and thus he presently espied Sir Hector, his wig askew, his weatherbeaten hat cocked at combative angle, purpose in every line of his gigantic figure.

Sir John frowned, pished and psha-ed, and, turning from the window, summoned Corporal Robert.

"You tell me that Sir Hector is unaware of my early departure?" he demanded.

"So far as I know, sir."

"Then what doth he abroad at so unseasonable an hour, pray?"

"Abroad, your honour? Where, sir?"

"Coming up the street — demme! There he is!" exclaimed Sir John pettishly, as a loud whistle shrilled beneath the window.

"Aye, that will be Sir Hector, your honour."

"Well, I 'll not see him! Confound everything, I say, I 'll not be pestered, Bob! "

"Oho, John . . . Johnnie . . . ocheigh!"

Sir John promptly closed the window, whereupon Sir Hector's voice rose but the louder:

"Oho, John . . . will ye no loot me ben?"

"Damme, but he 'll rouse the village!" cried Sir John.

"Shall I go down and let him in, your honour?"

"Yes, yes, in the devil's name! And hurry, he 'll be roaring in a moment."

Downstairs hasted Corporal Robert and opened the door, thus checking Sir Hector in the very commencement of an eldritch Highland war-cry, who nodded grimly and mounted the stair forthwith.

"Weel, Johnnie," quoth he, "sae ye 're gangin', lad, awa' frae your friends —"

"In about twenty minutes, Hector."

"Aye! An' whyfor maun ye steal awa' wi' no sae muckle as a grup o' the hand?"

"I intended to write to you, Hector."

"Aye! An' what o' the leddies . . . especially one?"

"I trust they are blooming in all health."

"Aye! An' whyfor maun ye rin awa'? Why maun we twine?"

"Because, since my Lord Sayle hath ceased to be, I languish for an object, Hector. The country wearies me."

"Aye! An' whaur are ye intendin' for?"

"London or Paris, perchance both."

"Ou aye! An' whiles ye 're gallivantin' yonder, what

o' the puir, sweet lass wha's breakin' her heart for ye? What o' Rose — no, the Leddy Herminia?"

"I venture to think her heart, if she hath one, is as sound as ever —"

"Ha! O man, I whiles wonder at ye!"

"Faith, Hector, the heart o' your finished coquette is a tough morsel —"

"And — ye loved her once, John!"

"I admit the folly, Hector. But my lady, happily for me, very deliberately and effectively killed that very preposterously foolish passion."

"She slaughtered it unco' quick, John, I'm thinkin'!"

"Yet none the less effectually, Hector."

"Ah, John lad, but true love taketh a deal o' killing, and moreover —"

"Gad's life!" laughed Sir John. "What know you o' love?"

Sir Hector quailed somewhat, dropped his hat and grew uncommonly red in the face, picking it up.

"Why, since you ask," he answered, "I — I've read some such in a book. . . . But, talkin' o' Rose-Herminia —"

"Is so much waste o' time and breath, Hector."

"John . . . O Johnnie, dae ye mean that?"

"Extremely!"

"You hae no desire to see her, or hear —"

"Positively no!"

"Then ye're a heartless gomeril!"

"Venus be thanked!"

"Man, are ye gone gyte? John, this is no' like ye. 'T is unworthy! This smacks o' pride an' fulish pique!" Sir John flushed angrily and opened the lattice.

"Enough, Hector!" said he, glancing out into the street. "Let us converse of other things — my chaise should be here soon."

"John," continued Sir Hector in his most precise English, "thou 'rt throwing away a great love, such a love as cometh to bless but few poor mortals, and then

but once, for true love, John, being lightly scorned, cometh not again . . . forbye, I read this in a book also! . . . But, O lad, 'tis in my mind you shall come to rue this bitterly — aye, to your last hour."

"Why, then, pray Heaven I live not over-long!"

Sir Hector stared into the coldly smiling face before him much as it had been the face of a stranger.

"Why, then, I'm by with ye, John!" sighed he. "Only this, either you are utterly heartless and selfish or . . ."

"Or, Hector?"

"Or agonising for her in your heart!"

"And yonder," said Sir John, glancing from the window — "yonder is the chaise at last, I think."

The vehicle in question having drawn up before the inn, Sir John put on hat and cloak and they descended the stair, all three, and with never a word between them.

"The valises, Robert?"

"Here, your honour!"

"The trunk, Robert?"

"Aye, sir!" And, beckoning to the post-boy, Robert hurried back upstairs, leaving Sir John to glance at the chaise, the horses, the blue sky and the deserted street, while Sir Hector stared gloomily at his own shabby hat, turning it over and over as if it had been some rare and very curious object.

"'T is to Parus ye'll be gangin', John?"

"Very like, Hector."

"An' the de'il! Aye, 't is the muckle de'il ye're bound for, lad!"

"Not necessarily, Hector."

"Troth, an' indeed Auld Hornie'll hae ye in his cloofs for guid and a' this time. Oh, 't is waefu' an' a' by reason o' your stubborn, wilfu' pride! . . . An' here was Auld Hector dreamin' o' ye settlin' doon at last wi' a bonny wife . . . aye, an' bairns, mebbe! . . . I was thinkin' if . . . your first chanced to be a boy . . . mebbe you'd name him after me, Hector's no sic a bad name, Johnnie . . . but now . . . !"

"Now, Hector, seeing I have not the remotest thought of marrying, why not get wed yourself. . . ; Mrs. Saunders, say . . . and call your first son 'John' after me?"

"Whisht, lad, dinna lichtlie the matter! Do not mock, sir!"

"I speak in all seriousness, Hector."

"Do not make me a jest, sir! Do not sneer at an old man's dreams. . . . They were very dear, very sacred to me. And now they lie shattered by your detestable selfishness . . . and I am an old man indeed!"

"Though you never looked stronger, Hector!"

"And what o' your tenantry, your people that should be your responsibility?"

"I leave them in good and, I think, capable hands."

"And Dering Manor, John . . . the old house you've just had made habitable, will you leave it to emptiness and decay?"

Sir John turned to stare down the empty street.

"Go you and live there, Hector," said he at last. "Why not? Mayhap I shall come back one day, but . . . just now I—I could not bear the place. . . . And, thank heaven, here they come with the trunk!" So saying, Sir John stepped rather hastily into the chaise as Robert and the post-boy appeared, bearing the leathern trunk between them.

"All aboard, Bob?"

"Aye, your honour."

"You will write every week regarding the estates?"

"Every week, sir."

"Then good-bye, Bob!"

"Good-bye, your honour!" And, having shaken the hand Sir John extended, the Corporal took three steps to the rear and stood at attention.

"Good-bye, Hector!"

"Fare ye weel, John! An' . . . ye've nae worrd for her . . . no message? Juist ane worrd, John?"

"Not one, Hector!"

"Aweel, guid-bye, lad! An' when ye're weary an' waeful an' heartsick, come back tae Alfriston, to the Downs, tae Auld Hector as lo'es ye vera weel — guid-bye!" Then Sir Hector nodded, the post-boy cracked his whip and the chaise rolled away.

## CHAPTER XLVII

### Telleth how My Lady Herminia Barrasdaile went A-wooing

It was a golden morning; beyond dew-spangled hedgerows stretched green meadows where brooks sparkled and the river gleamed, while afar, to right and left, rose the majestic shapes of Windover and Firle Beacon.

Never had the country looked so fair, never had it filled him with such yearning; never had the birds carolled so joyously. And very soon, instead of this widespread smiling countryside he loved so much, the reverent hush and stillness of these everlasting hills, the rugged, simple folk he had learned to honour and respect, in place of all this would be the narrow, roaring streets of London, the glitter of Mayfair, the whirl of Paris. . . . Emptiness and Desolation! Sir John sighed again and closed his eyes wearily.

Presently from an inner pocket he took a wallet, whence he extracted a small, folded paper and, opening this, beheld a thick curl of glossy black hair; for a long moment he gazed down at this; then, taking it from the paper, made to toss it from the chaise window. But, as he did so, the pretty thing twined itself softly about his finger and clung there, whereupon he sighed, raised it suddenly to his lips, kissed it passionately and cast it forth, shaking it violently from his hand much as if it had stung him.

And now from the wallet he drew a folded parchment, and frowned at the words that stared at him therefrom in fair black and white:

. . . A special Licence of Marriage, between . . .

Beholding which words, he laughed bitterly and made to tear the thing, then paused, folded and replaced it in

the wallet, and thrusting this back into his pocket, sat in frowning reverie.

Thus drove Sir John through the golden morning, looking neither to right nor left, scowling at the cushions before him, at his buckled shoes, his silk stockings, at anything and anywhere rather than the countryside he was leaving.

Nevertheless he was about to order the post-boy to drive faster, when the chaise slowed up suddenly and jolted to a standstill.

Out of the window went Sir John's indignant head on the instant.

"What the devil are ye stopping for?" he demanded. "What 's the matter?"

"I dunno, sir," answered the post-boy, pointing with his whip, "but 't was all along o' 'er . . . in the middle o' the road, sir!"

Forth from the chaise leapt Sir John in a fury.

"Damme, are ye drunk?" he demanded.

"Nary a drop, your honour, since nine o'clock las' night, on my David, sir! But theer she was, your honour, in the middle o' the fair-way, d' ye see, a-wavin' of 'er arms wild-like . . . would n't move, an' us nigh a-top of 'er, so pull up I 'ad to, sir."

"Ah!" quoth Sir John. "And now, my good Addlepate, will you pray inform me what the devil you are stopping for?"

"Why, lord, sir, ain't I a-tellin' your honour as she came out o' the 'edge yonder all suddent-like, an' waved 'er arms wild-like an'—"

"Aye, my good numbskull, but who?"

"A 'ooman, sir, a precious big 'un in a—"

"Then where is she, my good clod, where is she?"

"Here!" answered a voice.

Sir John spun round upon his heel and nearly gaped.

She was sitting in the chaise, her eyes very bright, her cheeks a little flushed beneath the hood of the long grey cloak that enfolded her.

For a long moment they gazed at one another speechlessly, while the post-boy sucked at the knob of his whip and stared with eyes round and bright as his buttons, for whose behoof Sir John presently spoke.

"Madam," said he, bowing with extreme ceremony, "I trust we ha'n't kept your ladyship long a-waiting! . . . You may drive on, my addle-brained wiseacre, and pocket this guinea for possessing the wit not to run over a lady in broad daylight." So saying, Sir John bestowed the coin, got into the chaise and closed the door, whereupon the jubilant post-boy cracked his whip ecstatically, chirruped gaily to his horses, and they drove on again.

"And now, madam," inquired Sir John coldly, eyelids a-droop, chin up-tilted, and seated as far from her as the narrow vehicle allowed, "pray, what folly is this?"

"Folly, indeed, John, to run away . . . and so very early in the morning, too!"

"How came you hither, madam?"

"In George Potter's cart. . . . And do not be so extreme distant, John . . . for thee I left my warm bed at sunrise!"

"Your ladyship amazes me!"

"Merely because, sir, with all your knowledge of womankind, you don't in the very least apprehend this woman. . . . O John, didst think I would suffer thee to steal thyself from me, so?"

"And why are you here, madam?"

"To woo thee," she answered softly, "to seek thy love."

Sir John started and turned to glance out of the window.

"How — how did you learn that I was leaving?" he questioned hastily.

"Old Penelope told me . . . and, John dear, she gave me a charm; a very potent spell should prevail with thee, an' my poor pleading may not."

Now, hearing the soft yearning in her voice, conscious of all the new, sweet gentleness of her as, tremulous, wist-

ful, she leaned towards him appealingly, he looked resolutely out of the window.

"Spells and charms the most potent, my lady, shall prove of none avail, for my love is surely dead!"

"Nay, thou foolish John, perchance it may swoon a little, but 't is not dead, for love that is of the true sort may never die. And thy love, methinks, is a true love indeed."

"It was," he corrected; "and you made of it a mock—"

"Nay, I did but laugh, John, but not at thy dear love-making. . . . Oh, indeed, thou 'rt the merest man to be so blind! My laughter was by reason o' the broken ornament, the tumbled chair, my torn gown. . . . I must ha' seemed so clumsy . . . but the room was so strait and I always feel myself so hugely vast! My laughter, John, was merest hysteria, which was strange in me, for I was never so before."

"Ha — never?" he questioned suddenly.

"Never with thee, John."

"The night Death crawled upon me in the hedge?"

"And I shielded thy dear body with mine, John . . . because I feared for thee, loved thee, and would ha' died for thee. . . . And 't was because of the last five years, the evil I had spoken of thee, the harms I had wickedly tried to work thee . . . this was why I would have died for thee, John, this, but never hysteria. . . . Aye, I know, indeed, I so named it, but this was only because I could think of naught else to retort upon thee with. . . ."

"Couldst indeed be so cruel?" he questioned more gently, but with his gaze still averted.

"Yet am I kinder than thou," she answered, "for if thou wilt break my poor heart and ruin my life, I will not suffer thee to break thine own. . . . So am I here beseeching thee to come back to love and me and the dear Down-country."

"Nay, this cannot be."

"Because I do love thee truly, John."

"This I cannot believe."

"Why, then, John, I am here to follow thee where thou wilt, to beseech thy forgiveness, to supplicate thee to love me a little . . . and because I am thine own, now and always, thou dear, brave, kind, cruel, unbelieving, wise and most foolish John! Wilt not look at me even now? Then needs must I use old Penelope's charm!"

Speaking thus, she thrust something into his fingers, and he saw this for the miniature of his long-dead father.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "What o' this?"

"You must open it, John. Penelope bid me tell you to open the back and read what your father wrote there so many years agone."

Mutely he obeyed, and, inscribed in small, clear characters, saw this:

Beloved,
though death
must needs come
to us soon or late,
yet do I know we can
never die since Love
is immortal. So by
thy love shall I live
on beyond death
with thee for
ever. Thy
John Dering.

For a while he sat staring at this message from the "living" dead; at last, and suddenly, he turned and looked at her.

"John," she whispered, "take me, beloved, and so let us make each other immortal."

Then Sir John reached out his arms and, drawing her to him, gazed deep into her eyes.

"Herminia," said he, "O Rose o' love . . . my Rose in very truth, at last!"

"For thy wearing, John," she sighed, "or needs must I fade soon and wither utterly away."

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### Which is, Happily, the Last

Old Mr. Dumbrell, perched in George Potter's cart behind the likely horse, blinked at the setting sun and shook his head; quoth he:

"The longer oi live, Jarge, the more sartin-sure be oi that there be no sich thing as gratitood nowheres, no!"

"What be troublin' of 'ee now, Gaffer?"

"Thinkin' o' Sir John Dering, oi be. Oh, 'e's mebbe this an' that an' t' other, but oi calls 'im naun but a ongrateful young barrynet!"

"Lord, old 'un," remonstrated Mr. Potter, "ain't 'e given ye your cottage, rent free?"

"Wot o' that?" snarled the Aged Soul. "Ain't 'e got 'unnerds an' thousands o' cottages? Wot's a cottage?"

"Well, but ain't 'e likewise give ye that little medder be'ind your cottage?"

"Oi never said 'e 'ad n't, did oi?"

"Aye, but ain't 'e give ye a cow along o' the medder an' a couple o' fat 'ogs?"

"Wot of 'em?" screeched the Aged One indignantly. "Oi bean't complainin' o' they, be oi? No, my trouble be 'im a-goin' away an' never s' much as a word to oi . . . an' me sech a very old, aged Soul as can't live much longer, an' 'im a-leavin' pore old oi wi' never no good-bye . . . an' never sendin' me that theer arm-cheer as 'e promised faithful!"

"Arm-cheer?" repeated Mr. Potter inquiringly.

"Ah! 'Osea,' says 'e, aye, an' called me 'is friend, 'e did, 'Osea,' says 'e, 'you shall set in comfort arl your days,' 'e sez — them were 'is very words! An' I 've been 'opin' an' a-waitin' an' expectin' that theer cheer ever since. . . . An' look wot I done for 'e!"

"Wot?" demanded Mr. Potter.

"Why, did n't oi comfort 'e an' talk to 'e when arl the world was agin' him? Did n't oi speak up for 'e on arl 'casions, ah — an' mak' love for 'e to 'is sweet'eart, tu? Was n't oi loike a feäther an' mother arl rolled into one? An' now 'ere be oi, an' 'im gone — an' no cheer!"

It was at this moment that, turning into the main road, they beheld a dusty chaise approaching at a smart trot, whereupon, the way being somewhat narrow, Mr. Potter pulled aside to make room; but scarcely had he done so than a cheery voice hailed him, the chaise pulled up, and out from the window came a bewigged head.

"Why, Potter — George Potter," cried a merry voice. "God bless ye, George; 't is very well met! And my friend Hosea too! How art thou, my Aged Soul? I vow thou 'rt looking younger than ever!"

"Lord, Sir John!" exclaimed Mr. Potter heartily, "I be main glad to see ye back, sir."

"And I 'm back for good, George . . . aye, for good of every kind and sort, I hope — "

"Why, then, that theer cheer, Sir John!" piped the Aged One. "Wot about my arm-cheer?"

"'E means the cheer your honour promised 'im, sir," explained Mr. Potter.

"Chair?" repeated Sir John in laughing puzzlement. "I fear I don't recall . . . but we will talk of this later. For the present, George, I want you to drive over to old Penelope and warn her that she hath visitors on the way to drink tea with her — "

"Say two visitors, Mr. Potter," laughed a second voice, and over Sir John's shoulder peeped my lady's lovely face; whereupon Mr. Potter flourished his whip exultantly and, wheeling the likely horse, drove off at such a pace that he was necessitated to hug the small, protesting Aged Soul for safety's sake.

"'T will give our revered witch due time to don the silken gown, mayhap, my Rose o' love."

"Aye, though — I think 't is donned already, sir."

"She expects us, then?"

"She doth, John! . . . And Aunt Lucinda will be there, and Sir Hector! . . . unless we have outworn their patience."

"But what shall bring them there? How know you this, child?"

"'Faith, sir, 't is because I invited 'em to meet us at Penelope's cottage —"

"Ha, wert so sure we should come back together, my Herminia?"

"Why, of course, John dear. Though I little thought we should ha' kept them so long a-waiting — see, the sun is set already and — nay, sir . . . oh, for mercy's sake, John . . . you 'll ha' my hair all down —"

"You 'll look but the lovelier —"

"Nay, prithee . . . oh, hark, John! Dost hear, dost hear how they welcome thee home at last, beloved?"

Upon the air rose a sudden, glad riot of bells lustily rung, a faint, silvery pealing that grew momentarily louder, until the joyous clamour thrilled in the air all about them.

"Hark, my John, where they welcome Dering of Dering home at last!"

"And his most dear lady!" he answered, drawing her close. "For, O my Herminia, my Rose-child, thou shalt teach him to live to better purpose . . . by thee 'The Wicked Dering' shall —"

"Ah, hush!" she murmured. "He was but a dream . . . but thou, my dear, brave, noble, most honourable . . . oh, wilt stifle me, John? Nay, they will see us —"

So in due season they drove into the winding street of High Dering where stood folk to cheer, to flourish hats and flutter scarves a little shyly, but to fall suddenly silent and stare wide-eyed as Sir John, my lady beside him, paused bare-headed to salute that solitary old creature whom all had scorned so long and persecuted as a witch; silent she stood leaning upon her staff, but in all the glory of rustling silk and belaced mutch, her indomitable old head aloft, her bright, old eyes keen as ever, yet surely

strangely gentle for a witch. And now Sir John was speaking, his clear voice very plain to be heard:

"Good friend Penelope, the years have been very cruel and hard for thee. But indeed thy sufferings have not been wholly in vain, as I think, and henceforth, John Dering shall be the first to do thee honour." So saying, he took that worn and shrivelled hand, drawing it within his arm, and so brought her to the cottage gate where stood the Duchess, glad-eyed, with Sir Hector towering gigantic behind her.

But now Mr. Potter's voice was heard in placid exhortation:

"Come, friends and neighbours, cheer now, a cheer for Dering o' Dering and his lady!" Hereupon, led by Mr. Potter's stentorian voice and the Aged Soul's shrill pipe, they cheered full-throated and with a will. "An' now, neighbours, one more for old Pen, as be true Sussex through an' through, barn an' bred—"

"Aye, cheer, ye fules!" shrilled the Aged Soul, flourishing his hat. "Beller for ol' Pen, an' dannel 'im as doan't, says oi!"

"Hoot-toot, Johnnie-man," quoth Sir Hector as they crossed the little garden, "ye kept us waitin' a' the day whiles ye made up your mind, it seems—an' me in ma vera best clo'es, y' ken—but 't was worth it, lad, and—why, what now?" For old Penelope had paused suddenly to take my lady's hand to gaze on it through gathering tears and kiss it with strange fervour.

"What, John—a ring?" exclaimed Sir Hector—"an' a weddin'-ring, forbye—already? Why, man, doth it mean—"

"Ah, Sir Hector," cried old Penelope, "it do mean as the dead 'as liveth for ever' hath spoke from beyond his grave . . . it meaneth, God be praised, that true love is immortal indeed!" So, hand in hand, the old woman and the young entered the cottage.

"But, Johnnie, wull ye be for tellin' me that it means—"

"That they are married, sir," answered the little Duchess — "wooed and won and wedded, sir! Which is great joy to me, for our Herminia hath found a man shall rule her rigorously at last; in a word, master her megrims, control, curb and constrain her contrariness as only a masterful man might."

"Wooed and won . . . rule rigorously!" murmured Sir Hector, "curb and constrain — "

"Well, sir, well, why must you mop and mow and mutter like a mere male? Wouldst not do the same, sir?"

Then, looking down into the little Duchess's strangely youthful eyes, Sir Hector emitted that sound to which no one but a true-born Scot may give utterance, and which, so far as poor words go, may be roughly translated thus:

"Umph-humph!" quoth Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean.

NON·REFERT QVAM·MVLTOS SED·QVAM BONOS·HABEAS
L.B.&C.

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